

Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes

The Spirit Hunters of Tomoe



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Onmyoji and Tengu Eyes: The Spirit Hunters of Tomoe

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Chapter 1: Moving Means Trouble

IT was springtime.

With April fast approaching and the weekend well underway, even the smallest of towns bustled with people coming and going. It was in one of those buzzing little towns that a young man stood in an apartment complex, staring at the studio apartment before him in a daze.

His name was Misato Miyazawa, and he was twenty-two years old. His long, black hair had a breathtaking shine and fell iron-straight against his back in a ponytail. He wore skinny jeans that accentuated his slender legs and a dark, short trench coat.

He carried his long limbs with an elegance borne of a fortunate upbringing, and his facial features intimated a charming personality. In a rural town far removed from any large cities, hair as long as his would usually attract curious glances from passersby, but its length suited his androgynous appearance so well that it didn't look at all out of place.

The awkward way he stood rooted to the spot with his mouth gaping open, however, rendered his beauty somewhat pointless. He was utterly dumbfounded by what he saw, his mind completely blank.

In front of him, a resident who looked like they'd only just arrived rushed about the room, unpacking their belongings. Behind Misato, a moving truck full of his own belongings was parked at the side of the road.

"Wh-What's going on...?" he asked in confusion. The apartment in front of him was definitely the one he'd signed the contract for. It was definitely the one he was scheduled to move into that day—or at least, it was *supposed* to be.

"Mr. Miyazawa... What should we do with your stuff?" one of the movers called out uncertainly, climbing out of the truck.

"What *should* we do?" Misato echoed, accidentally voicing his thoughts aloud.

The mover heaved a huge, exasperated sigh, his response a

mixture of both confusion and irritation. It was the last weekend of March, peak season for movers as people embarked on new ventures for the spring. And although they were a group of young, fit men, even these movers seemed at the end of their tethers.

“First, I should go check with the realtor I signed the contract with. I’ll see if I can find out what’s going on. Could I possibly ask you to wait here another thirty minutes?” Misato pleaded.

The movers weren’t the only busy ones; he was supposed to start a new job the following week, and he didn’t have time to deal with finding somewhere new to live when he’d already been through all the paperwork. Before moving, he’d been living in a university dorm, which was in another prefecture altogether, so there was no way he could commute to work from there. His parents’ home wasn’t nearby either—and besides, he hadn’t lived there since middle school.

He was in Tomoe, a town in Hiroshima Prefecture. Nestled within the Chugoku Mountains, it lay between three rivers branching off in different directions. Since ancient times, Tomoe had flourished as a link between the San’in and San’yo regions, its status as a border town making it a key location for travelers and traders alike. The original settlement had been situated in a basin between the mountains where the three rivers intersected. Tomoe had then developed outward, with the old village as its foundation, in time becoming the most central town in northern Hiroshima.

And, on April 1, Misato Miyazawa would begin working in Tomoe—at Tomoe Town Hall.

A northerly wind came tumbling down the gentle slopes of the Chugoku Mountains, the tips of the sakura trees in the park swaying in its wake. Their flower buds were still tightly shut, awaiting the warmth of springtime.

The wind had a bite to it and was far too cold to really be called a “spring breeze.” Misato turned up the collar of his coat and breathed a deep sigh. The warmth he’d absorbed in the broker’s heated office was swept away in an instant, although he was already chilled to the core by what they had told him there, so it made no difference.

When Misato left the apartment that was supposed to belong to him, little had he known he was running straight toward the cold, harsh reality of his fate. As it turned out, the real estate agency had messed up somewhere along the line, and the apartment had been double-booked. Worse, Misato had signed his contract *after* the other person, and his move-in date was later, too. In other words, he wouldn't be able to move in no matter how much of a fuss he kicked up.

The real estate agent responsible for the blunder gave him an earnest apology and tried to locate another apartment for him. In a town with no universities or large corporations, however, studio apartments were scarce. The two of them couldn't find a single apartment within his budget, so Misato, giving up, decided to visit some other brokers instead. He had left the office in a huff about five minutes previous.

"Well, I can be certain of one thing... I'm probably not moving to a new place today, no matter how hard I try," he said to himself, sighing again.

Ugh, and it's cold, too.

Although the chill of early spring in Tomoe didn't even compare to the cold he'd grown up with, he felt especially vulnerable to the low temperature that day for some reason. It probably had something to do with his frosty mood.

In the empty park opposite the broker's office, Misato leaned against the frame of a swing set and stared up at the sky, fiddling with his phone. He'd called the movers and asked them to keep his belongings in storage (at an additional cost, of course) until he found somewhere else to live.

Worst-case scenario, he could make do sleeping in his car, but he really wanted to find a place before starting his new job.

"Hmm..." he sighed, exhausted. "What am I going to do?"

He didn't want to end up homeless. Besides, he'd already submitted the change to his certificate of residence, and it would be beyond ironic for someone working at the town hall to have no fixed address. That wouldn't be a good look.

With worry weighing heavily on his heart, he trudged toward where his car was parked on the street. As he exited the park, he glanced up to see a strange man in flashy clothing standing there—right next to his perfectly clean car, which he'd had freshly polished for the move. The man turned, and Misato froze.

His hair was a bright blond, most likely dyed—or bleached, rather—and it stuck up in a wild flurry of spikes, molded by some sort of hair product. He wore an obnoxiously orange hoodie with the bottom of his shirt sticking out from underneath, and his baggy cargo pants hung low around his waist. A large, sturdy wallet chain jingled where it dangled from his hip. To top the look off, silver piercings glittered in his ears, and faintly colored sunglasses obscured his eyes. His entire demeanor oozed *unapproachable*.

If they had been downtown in a large city, Misato would have barely noticed him. Tomoe, on the other hand, was a quiet, rural town, without a single high-rise building in sight. Dressed like a thug from a manga of a bygone era, the man stood out like a sore thumb. Misato had never, ever before laid eyes upon a character like him in real life—and he was standing right in front of Misato's *baby*, of all things.

Wh-What in the world...?! What have I done to deserve such bad luck today?!

Instinctively, Misato took a nervous step back.

As if he'd heard it, the thug swiveled around. He casually raised one hand in greeting, before beginning to approach Misato in large strides. With the man's eyes hidden, Misato had no idea what he was thinking, and the way his lips were gradually stretching into a grin was hair-raising. He looked like trouble, but Misato had no memory of ever getting involved in any shady business. Just what was going on?

Despite his internal panic, Misato couldn't even run away. All he could do was stare, his mouth hanging open. Once they were standing face-to-face, he could tell that the man was slightly taller. Misato had to look up to meet his gaze.

This could be bad. Really bad.

As Misato's heart skipped a beat in fear, the thug said in a cheery tone, "Hey! Heard you've got nowhere to live. I know a great place. Wanna hear me out?"

THE blond man with piercings took off his sunglasses and introduced himself as Ryouji Karino. He said he was probably around twenty-three or twenty-four years old; apparently, he had

no memories of his early childhood, so he didn't know when exactly he'd been born. People didn't normally reveal those sorts of things when first meeting someone, but Karino spoke about it as if he couldn't care less. Misato simply goggled at him, wide-eyed, nodding with noncommittal hums of acknowledgment as Karino recounted his life story.

"What're you lookin' at me like that for? You don't believe me?" Karino asked, scowling.

"N-No, I do. It's just..." Misato trailed off.

Karino didn't press him to continue. Instead, he took a pack of cigarettes from the front pocket of his hoodie and propped one between his lips with a friendly smile.

"Want one?" he asked, holding the pack out to Misato, who shook his head in reply and swiftly shuffled aside to put more distance between them. He hated the smell of cigarette smoke.

Misato plastered a stiff, fake smile on his face as he mapped out possible escape routes in his head. He didn't know what this man wanted him for.

In an attempt to parse Karino's intent, Misato looked up once again and found himself entranced by what he saw. With the sunglasses gone, he could see the peculiar color of Karino's eyes. They were focused on the end of his cigarette as he tried to light it, but when his gaze flicked upward, they met Misato's.

"Your eyes are an unusual color." His thoughts spilled from his lips without warning. For a moment, he had lost himself in the way Karino's vivid green eyes shimmered, a silvery undertone flashing through them.

Judging by Karino's fashion sense, it was entirely possible that he wore colored contacts. However, at such a close distance, Misato could see his irises turn translucent when the muted sunlight shone across them. They were a beautiful color, and Misato was struck by just how unusual they really were. He understood then why Karino wore sunglasses; perhaps his eyes were more sensitive to light than most.

"Yeah, I guess," Karino said, shrugging. "They're called tengu eyes. I can see things that other people can't, basically. Speaking of which...there's something inside you, isn't there?" he speculated with a mischievous smile, skillfully squinting one eye as though he were examining Misato.

Misato's heart began to hammer in his chest. Karino, in

contrast, looked amused as he watched Misato stiffen up and he grinned with the cigarette filter between his teeth.

“Haha, don’t sweat it. I just thought I should come say hi. It’s pretty rare to see someone else in the same business around these parts. The hairstyle gave you away, y’see, and... *C’m on*, don’t give me that look. That stuff’s no big deal in our line of work, y’know. I mean, with my eyes, I get the same thing,” said Karino, blowing a puff of smoke into the air as he slipped his sunglasses on again. His gaze shifted away from Misato’s nervous face and up to the pale-blue sky. “As long as I wear these, I don’t have to see that stuff, anyway,” he said, shrugging again.

The sun was bright, but the wind was still cold. It sent a shiver through Misato, and Karino glanced at him before pointing toward a vending machine at the edge of the park. He offered to get them some hot coffee from the machine and steered Misato toward a bench. Karino got a sugary, rich latte for himself, whereas Misato asked for an unsweetened black coffee. The can was warm between his hands, yet the cheap-looking plastic bench was leeching all his body heat through his behind.

“I heard what happened to you from the old guy at the real estate agency. *Whew*, what a disaster.” Karino shook his head. “That’s some luck, though—in a way. I mean, findin’ a place to rent is a nightmare for people like us. When they see what’s written in the ‘employment’ box, they don’t want anythin’ to do with us.”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Misato.

“Hm?”

“When you say ‘people like us,’ who do you mean?” he asked suspiciously. There was no way he could simply overlook such baseless assumptions about his profession.

“Well, people like you and me...” Karino replied, confused. “Psychics, I guess. Exorcists, mediums, shamans...whatever term you wanna use. Either way, from society’s point of view, we’re no different than yakuza or conmen.” He laughed, popping his can open with the pull tab before gulping down a huge swig of latte.

It was true that self-proclaimed, self-employed psychics didn’t have a particularly good reputation with the general public. But Misato was different.

“...I got a job at Town Hall, though,” he said in a small voice. As of April 1, he would be their newest employee—and he didn’t have to hide a thing about himself. He was going to be working in

the General Affairs Department—more specifically, as part of the Abnormal Disaster Unit, which was in the Crisis Management Division.

“Town Hall, huh...? Interes—” Karino began, rattling off an automatic response before catching himself. “Wait a moment... What the heck...?! *The* Town Hall?!” he shouted wildly as he turned to face Misato, jerking forward. “With *that* hair?!”

That was a sore subject. As if he’d been stabbed, a sudden pain rendered Misato momentarily speechless. He had to admit that it was in no way normal for a working, adult man—and a civil servant, no less—to have waist-length hair.

“I... I need it for my rituals!” Misato protested, clutching his jet-black ponytail. He wasn’t growing it out for the heck of it, and his new employers understood that. They *had* warned, however, that he’d get some weird stares, as most citizens weren’t aware of its significance.

“Hmm, really?” Karino cast him a curious glance. “Actually, I think I heard something about this... There was some rumor about the Something-Or-Other Disaster Unit.”

“Abnormal Disaster Unit, yes. Also, just so you know, I’m a *qualified* Shinto priest.”

Strictly speaking, Misato’s actual job title was “private onmyoji,” but it was a vocation that encompassed a range of different religious practices and arts: Shintoism, Buddhism, and Shugendo, which was a mix between the two. Naturally, as an onmyoji he was also very familiar with Onmyodo—the way of the Yin and Yang, which focused on divination rituals and astronomy. Simply put, a private onmyoji dealt with anything to do with the occult.

In fiction, onmyoji appointed by the government were often celebrated and even depicted as superheroes in some scrolls from the Heian period. Unfortunately, real-life private onmyoji were usually regarded as fakes and lumped into the same category as seedy exorcists and scam artists. So Misato wasn’t too pedantic about his title.

“Wow, that’s some talent, huh? ...Come to think of it, did you come all the way to Tomoe just to take the civil service exam?”

Situated in the majestic Chugoku Mountains, the prosperous town of Tomoe had a rich history; since times long past, gods, phantoms, and specters roamed the land, coexisting with society.

Even after hundreds of years, those strange beings still possessed great power, so the municipal government had formed a unit to deal with the unrest they caused. It was the perfect place for Misato.

“Well, yes. I did,” he replied.

He didn’t want Karino to think he’d only moved to Tomoe because he wanted to be a civil servant. That made it sound like he’d applied for the position just to have a stable source of work.

That was exactly why I applied, though.

“Whoa, you really are somethin’ else. You don’t really hear of any exorcists in public office. I bet it’s a really competitive field!” Karino cackled, putting the can to his lips again. Luckily, it seemed like he didn’t really care why Misato had applied.

“They accept one in every five hundred applicants,” Misato deadpanned.

“...Seriously?” Karino said, his hand tightening around the empty latte.

Satisfied that he’d been able to dispel some of Karino’s frankly *rude* preconceptions about his occupation, Misato finally opened his own can of coffee. He sipped the bitter liquid and grimaced. It was already lukewarm. The canned stuff was never much good anyway. Though the ones packed with sugar were even worse. Misato always avoided sweets if he could.

“For a guy in such high demand, it’s pretty funny that you’ve got nowhere to live.” The incredibly shady-looking “psychic” dropped his empty can into the recycling bin, then shot Misato a sly grin. Apparently, he could see right through Misato’s foolish pride. “Well, at any rate, we’re in the same industry, so I wanna help out. You need a place to stay tonight, don’tcha? I can help you there. Then if you like it, you can move your stuff in later,” Karino suggested. “Sound good? All right. Let’s go.”

He stood up, leaving no room for debate as he beckoned Misato to follow him, and walked toward the park exit.

Misato took a halting step forward, then called out to the back of Karino’s head, baffled. “Why would you do that for me?” he asked, blinking.

Karino stopped mid-stride, his high-top basketball sneakers crunching against the gravel. Sunlight flashed across his sunglasses as he looked back at Misato over his shoulder. “I’m with the real estate agency, too. They gave me a job dealing with unwanted

properties—places with ghost trouble, places where people’ve died, committed a crime...whatever,” he began, before pausing for a moment. “...Plus, you seem like an interesting guy,” he added cheerily, pointing a finger at Misato’s collar and what moved beneath it.

Due to Karino’s sunglasses, Misato couldn’t read his expression, but there was no hint of malice in his tone, at least. Still, if he was telling the truth, it seemed Karino had quite the impulsive nature.

“It’s a twenty-minute drive from here. It’s kinda out of the way, but if you’ll be drivin’ to work, it’s no biggie. It’s an old, detached house, with a remodeled outbuilding. The outbuilding consists of two rooms with different design. The Japanese-style room is about thirty-two square feet, and the Western-style room is about forty-two square feet. That one’s got a sink,” he explained.

“You’ll have to share the bathroom since that’s in the main house, but if we put an induction stove top in the outbuilding, you’ll be able to cook there. So basically, you’ll be a lodger. The rent’s 30,000 yen per month, including utility and internet costs. No deposit or extra fees required. The landlord usually works at night, so don’t worry about curfews an’ that. Either way, you’ll be able to come and go as you like.”

Karino’s description was surprisingly fluid, and Misato found himself hesitant to ask the question on his mind. “Right... And who might the landlord b—?”

“Me.”

“...Sorry?”

The thug-like, self-proclaimed exorcist smiled slightly as he pointed to himself and gazed at Misato, whose lips parted in confusion.

“I was asking if you wanna live in the outbuilding at my house,” Karino reiterated.

“Wha—?! Wh-Why would...?”

They had only just met. Literally. His housing dilemma notwithstanding, Misato wasn’t so trusting as to fall to his knees and accept Karino’s offer without question.

“Do you really think a town out in the sticks like this is full of realtors and empty apartments? It’s not like I bite...although if you were a woman, I might consider it,” Karino said, grinning. “We’re basically colleagues, remember? Helping others makes the world go

'round. Besides, you never know—we may be strangers as of this moment, but the depth of our bond is yet to be discovered!”

Misato couldn't help but hum doubtfully in reply. Karino was smiling, but behind his faintly colored sunglasses, his eyes narrowed in self-satisfaction. Somehow, his friendly sentiments didn't sound quite genuine: he was being overly theatrical, almost as if he were acting in a historical play. Not to mention, *tengu* themselves were goblin-like creatures with a penchant for trickery and manipulation—if Karino had *tengu* eyes, was it possible his character was similarly influenced?

What's the deal with this guy? Am I being scammed or something...? But what could he want from me?

“C'mon, man, what're you so scared for? You look like you've seen a ghost! Which should be no trouble for a one-in-five-hundred *elite* civil servant like you,” Karino commented with an ill-natured snicker.

Misato knew Karino was trying to provoke him, but he was determined to stand his ground. He wasn't pleased about the extra commute time, but the rent price was too good to ignore. And by that point, the wind had chilled him to his very core; all he wanted to do was get inside. Sometime during their conversation he'd drunk the rest of his coffee, and he tossed it into the trash. The crisp, spring air made his long bangs sway.

“...I'm not an abandoned kitten in a cardboard box, you know,” Misato said frostily. He was a sore loser though, and it was obvious he didn't want to admit defeat outright.

“You might not be a kitten, but you *are* looking for a loving home,” Karino easily countered with a chortle.

Despite his displeasure, Misato resigned himself to his circumstances and followed Karino reluctantly.

AFTER viewing Ryouji Karino's house that evening, Misato had ended up asking the movers to bring his belongings to the outbuilding the following day—mainly out of an unwillingness to pay the extra fees for extending the storage period. In both high school and college, Misato had lived in dorms, so he didn't own much. Even so, he barely managed to get the room looking tidy

before starting work on Monday.

Just as Karino had described, the house was about a twenty-minute drive from central Tomoe, situated deep in the mountains. They'd followed alongside one of the rivers until they entered the foothills. Then, after driving up an empty road without a house or field in sight, they'd come out into a small clearing. Terraced paddy fields stretched out on either side of the narrow river, and near the mountain's edge perched a tiny cluster of houses with red roof tiles.

Apparently, in that group of ten or so homes, Karino's was the only one actually occupied. The others were most often empty, their owners only visiting every now and then to tend to the fields on days off. It was a textbook example of the effects of urbanization. Though in Karino's case, it was ideal: with a laugh, he'd explained that he ran into less trouble concerning his appearance or profession with no one else around.

Because many of the owners either employed people to look after their farmland or took care of it themselves in their spare time, the fields were all ploughed and ready for planting. Looking at it, no one would think the tiny village was almost deserted. Although the place did have a rather empty feel, the buildings were well-maintained, nothing decaying nor in disrepair. It was a very peculiar atmosphere.

Within that small, quiet village deep in the mountains, Karino had showed Misato a mansion-like house that was noticeably larger than the others. Evidently, it had once been the village head's estate. The main building was two stories high with a half-hipped roof adorned with bright red clay tiles. Numerous small buildings surrounded it. The outbuilding that Misato had decided to rent was one, of course, but there was also a shed, two storehouses, and more; it was a truly impressive property.

With his stomach full, and having just taken a bath, Misato breathed a sigh of relief.

He pulled the paper sliding door open, passing into the Japanese-style room without turning the light on. He'd already changed into his pajamas and was mostly ready for bed. As he walked inside, he looked out into the courtyard on the south side of the building. The window was made from a single sheet of glass and also functioned as the patio door. Sitting down, Misato cast his eyes over the dark landscape, studying the overgrown vegetation. Once upon a time, it'd probably been a charming, beautiful spot. It was a

little past nine o'clock, and although Misato had already done everything he'd planned to for the day, it was slightly too early to go to sleep.

Far from any light pollution or even streetlights, the estate was enveloped in the hazy light of the waxing moon. The only sounds filling the air were croaking frogs as they emerged from hibernation and the distant bubbling of a stream. Misato had never thought he'd manage to find somewhere so dark and so quiet. He looked out the window fondly, the lack of human presence blissfully calming.

"That Karino really is a weird guy...or maybe it'd be more accurate to say he's eccentric...? Welp, either way, he's a character," Misato murmured to himself.

As it turned out, Karino had only moved to Tomoe from Tokyo last year. While taking on jobs as an exorcist, he also worked part-time at a bar downtown. Luckily, it seemed he had no plans to scam Misato, but Misato still couldn't understand why he would give a stranger free access to his own home—especially since he was always away working during the night.

As Misato mused to himself, he noticed several white, mist-like apparitions gathered in the courtyard, floating close to a small pond ringed by wildflowers and evergreens. He knew they were some sort of specter—a type of natural spirit that originated in the mountains. They must have flowed into the courtyard via the mountain stream that connected to the pond. The first night Misato stayed in that room, he'd watched them in mute astonishment.

Until Karino arrived, the estate had been vacant for almost ten years. He couldn't possibly clean the place up all by himself, which was why the grounds were so overgrown with wild plants and weeds. Out of the many rooms in the main building, Karino only used the kitchen and the adjoining living room. He kept his own space clean and tidy, but the rest of the house was effectively abandoned. When Misato decided to move in, Karino had said that instead of paying rent, Misato could help with the house maintenance—although, with his tone of voice, Misato could never really be sure whether he was joking or not.

I can't believe I'm actually going to be living here.

For various reasons, Misato had cut off contact with his family just as he graduated from high school, and Tomoe was a place he had no connections with whatsoever. The day he took the civil service exam for the town hall position was the first time he'd ever

even set foot in the area. He was starting a completely new life in a town where he had no memories or old friends to speak of.

“Oh well. There’s no point dwelling on the past. I can do this...!” Misato said with new resolve, motivated as he leapt to his feet.

The very moment he turned away to finish getting ready for bed, the lamps lining the walkway to the main building flickered on.

RYOUI Karino was an exorcist.

People often called him weird—partly due to the fact that he wore sunglasses regardless of the time of day—but even so, his skill earned him enough money that he never went hungry. Ryouji was proud of that. He wasn’t going to pretend that being a psychic was a publicly respected profession, so he saw no point in squeezing into uncomfortable, formal clothes just to keep up appearances.

He’d moved into the old, Japanese-style mansion just under a year ago, and he still had no real sense that he was actually living in the huge thing. It felt more like he was renting a couple of rooms or using it temporarily as somewhere to stay. That was why he hadn’t hesitated to casually offer a couple more rooms to the homeless “colleague” he found wandering the park in a daze.

It’s not like there’s nothin’ in it for me, though.

When he flipped a switch with a loud *clack*, the incandescent lights hanging from the ceiling of the covered veranda lit up. The veranda ran from the entrance of the main house along the edge of the building, then turned a corner and enclosed the courtyard before linking up with the outbuilding. By using the adjacent deck, Ryouji reckoned he would be able to check in on his new housemate. With that thought in mind, he stepped out onto the old, wooden planking. It was riddled with woodworm holes and creaked as he made his way down the passage.

After passing the three guest rooms on the south side of the main house, he reached the western courtyard. A sun-bleached, flimsy curtain suspended across the walkway obscured it from view. If he tugged the fabric aside, he would be able to see the small pond in the middle of the overgrown courtyard and the open veranda of

the outbuilding that had been closed off until only a few days before. Judging by the way Ryouji's new tenant had moved his things in and unpacked so quickly, he must have found a way to settle into the spooky building.

We are in the same business, after all. It's gotta take more than a few specters to scare him off.

Suddenly, a small presence knocked on the bottom of a glass door to his right with two sharp taps. A half-hearted laugh spilled from Ryouji's lips. He'd come to own the house through an acquaintance's connections and had learned very quickly that it was "haunted." He slept on the eastern side of the estate, so he'd attempted to make that area somewhat presentable. But the weeds returned no matter how frequently he yanked them out or cut them back, and there was nothing he could do to stop the stream from bringing swathes of spirits down the mountain.

At the very least, he'd gotten rid of the whopper of a creature he'd found dwelling in the empty house when he first moved there. Most of the specters, however, were native to the mountains, which meant more showed up whenever he tried to exorcise them or drive them away. He'd given up on purifying the entire estate long ago.

He pulled back the curtain, and the pitch-black of the courtyard filled his vision.

For a moment, he blinked in confusion; he'd assumed that he would at least see light spilling from the window of the outbuilding, but it was just as swamped in darkness as the night itself. Perhaps Miyazawa had already gone to sleep. Yet, when he scanned the right-hand side of the courtyard, he noticed that the sliding door to the Japanese room was wide open. Standing in the middle of the shadowed room, was a hazy, white figure. Ryouji gulped.

Crap! Did that huge thing have buddies?!

The large, pure-white phantom wore a kimono and had long, black hair, which fell forward over its face. Most likely it had sensed the presence of someone new and drifted down the mountain to intimidate them. Even if his lodger was in the same business, no one would want *that* as a housewarming gift.

Suddenly struck by the fear that the new guy might decide to leave after all, Ryouji rushed toward the outbuilding. Its front door was right at the end of the deck, and he ran to it at full speed. He anchored his left hand on the edge of the sliding door and threw it open with all his strength. Meanwhile, with his right hand, he

focused power into his fingertips, poised to exorcise the ghost. The sound of the door rocketing into its frame resounded throughout the room with a giant *thunk*, and Ryouji leapt into the gloom as he began to chant a mantra.

“Rin, pyou, tou, sha—”

“AAAAGH!”

“Kai, jin... Wait, what?” Ryouji trailed off, his right hand freezing mid-mudra. At the end of his fingers stood not a ghost...but his housemate, looking extremely shaken.

“What’s wrong with you?! You can’t go around pointing ritual gestures at people!” he shrieked.

“What the hell?! But I... I...!” Ryouji exclaimed in confusion.

There was no doubt about it. The man holding his arms up over his head was definitely the person Ryouji had invited to stay there.

...In fact, when Ryouji thought about it, he had long hair, too. And, for some reason he was wearing a white kimono, of all things.

After a few moments of dumbfounded staring, the lodger gradually brought his arms down. The white of his kimono and pale skin reflected the faint moonlight, making him stand out against the dark. His straight, raven-black hair was down, falling to his waist. The effect enhanced by the sinister atmosphere, his androgynous visage and graceful features made him the very picture of a stereotypical ghost.

Most ghosts didn’t brush their teeth, though. Judging by the toothbrush in his hand and his wary gaze, all Ryouji had done was threaten a dude minding his own business.

“Hey...” Ryouji said, finally managing to squeeze some words from his throat, his tone intensely awkward and stiff. *“You could’ve at least turned the lights on, you jerk...”*

“I’m sorry...” Miyazawa replied, his eyebrows rising in embarrassment as he realized what had happened. *“U-Um, I always wear these kinds of pajamas, so...”* he muttered in shame, by way of excuse.

Quite frankly, Ryouji didn’t particularly care what sort of pajamas pretty boys wore. One thing did slightly concern him, though. His sunglasses had shifted out of place, and he could see something squirming across the gap of skin revealed by the man’s disheveled kimono.

“Listen, it’s fine. My bad for interrupting you,” Ryouji

apologized with a dismissive wave of his hand.

He'd only taken the guy in because he'd thought a fellow occultist would be the perfect person to help clean the estate up, but apparently there was more to Miyazawa than met the eye. In fact, Ryouji had a feeling he'd invited something even more troublesome into his home.

Though I guess I dig that, too.

At the very least, Miyazawa didn't seem like the kind of guy to make a run for it when confronted with the kinds of specters that showed up around the house. As long as he was willing to clear up the west side of the estate, Ryouji couldn't complain.

"Anyway, I'll see ya later. Goodnight," Ryouji said with another brief wave, turning his back to the bewildered lodger as he left the building the same way he'd come.

Chapter 2: Outsiders and the Boundary

IT was Misato's first day at work. He sat in a meeting room with about ten other new recruits for orientation. They would undertake two days of training—consisting of position handovers, briefings from the mayor, and so on—before they really started their respective duties.

Misato was mainly worried about how he was going to introduce himself to everyone.

"It's nice to meet you all. I'm Misato Miyazawa, and I'll be working as part of the Abnormal Disaster Unit in the Crisis Management Division. I'll be one of the technical staff."

In any department, technical staff were employees who possessed specific skillsets, knowledge, and certifications in their field. Such specialists were often in demand in childcare, public health, and engineering, for example. Misato's job opening had required qualification as a monk or Shinto priest as well as a thorough command of the skills and know-how expected of a medium.

After beginning his introduction, however, the mood of the room had turned sour. It didn't seem like they would take too kindly to an in-depth explanation of his position.

Don't tell me...even the other Town Hall employees don't see our department as a legitimate one...?

Misato couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I look forward to working with you," he eventually said, bowing slightly as he hurriedly sat down again. Admittedly, his pride was wounded. He desperately wished he could crawl into a hole and hide his long, lovingly cared-for hair. Physically, he was still sitting in the meeting, but mentally he was far, far away.

He thought back to what had happened around ten minutes prior.

BEFORE the meeting, someone from human resources called out to Misato and gave him a casual rundown on his department's standing within Town Hall.

"It's pretty tough to explain what the Abnormal Disaster Unit takes care of, isn't it? Hang in there! Though, of course, us guys in the General Affairs Department know what's up. The mayor and deputy mayor do, too. But when it comes to the regular staff..." They gave a sympathetic smile. "They don't go to your division very often, so I think there are a lot of young'uns and people from outta town who don't know anything about it. And this year, there's a number of new folks from outta town, so I'm sorry if that becomes an issue for you..."

The person seemed busy with preparations for the orientation, so they simply left Misato with that apology before dashing away to print some documents. Amid the chaos, another civic employee working nearby urged him on his way, and Misato was brimming with anxiety by the time he finally reached the meeting room on the fifth floor. He was just barely late, delayed only by his conversation beforehand, but all the other new recruits were already seated when he arrived.

All eyes were on him as he pulled the stiff, aluminum sliding door closed. Some people stared at him with unabashed suspicion, while others quickly averted their eyes to gaze at a very intriguing patch of blank wall instead. Confronted by such an unwelcoming atmosphere so early on, Misato could feel his stomach beginning to churn.

As he swiftly scanned the room for somewhere to sit, a familiar face caught his eye. Unlike the others, the man was calmly watching on, looking at Misato with no apprehension or fear to speak of. Misato found himself staring right back, trying to figure out where he knew the man from.

Wait, isn't that Hirose?!

After another glance, Misato was certain. It was Takayuki Hirose, one of his classmates from high school. They hadn't kept touch after graduation—mostly due to Misato's circumstances—but at the time, they had been close friends.

To see a familiar face when his morale was down was extremely comforting. Misato instantly felt as though the world around him shone brighter. Unfortunately, the seat next to Hirose was already taken, but he saw an empty one relatively close by. He

started to walk toward it.

However, the moment their eyes met, Hirose awkwardly turned his head away. Misato recoiled for a moment in shock, but he was already walking toward the empty chair. He'd draw even more attention to himself by suddenly changing course, so he ended up sitting behind Hirose, a little off to the side. As he did, Hirose twisted as far as possible in the opposite direction.

Honestly, Misato was hurt. At that point the last thing he wanted to do was approach Hirose.

Had they been strangers, it wouldn't have bothered him. But to be ignored by someone he'd considered a friend... Misato was understandably rattled. Back in high school, Hirose had always been cheerful and amicable and was the type of person who got along with everyone.

In the end, Misato spent those two days of training sessions not talking to anyone unless he absolutely had to.

SOMEHOW, Misato had endured almost an entire month of work after his bittersweet first day.

The Abnormal Disaster Unit's office was on the third level of the shabby-looking main building. Since the town council's assembly hall was on the same floor, there were no other departments in the vicinity. Additionally, the office was situated in a corner, which meant that neither citizens nor employees from other divisions had any reason to pass by.

The windows faced the town hall's new, five-story office building, which cast a huge shadow over the space—despite the fact that they were on the top floor. If he were to look up the word “crevice” in the dictionary, Misato thought sardonically, he would find a photograph of their dark, cramped office.

“Hey, Miyazawa. Could I borrow yeh for a moment?” a man called out from his desk, holding a clipboard in his hands.

The man, Haruka Tsujimoto, was one of Misato's superiors in the division and often gave him advice and guidance. “Haruka” was usually a girl's name, but *this* Haruka was a guy in his mid-to-late thirties. Outside of his position at the town hall, he was a monk at a Shin Buddhist temple in Tomoe. He wore half-rim glasses that

suit him well, and he had a calm, gentle personality.

“Of course. What is it?” Misato replied, looking up from his computer and withdrawing his hand from the mouse. He had been in the middle of a fierce battle with the department’s digital records software.

Although he’d been hired as a specialist, Misato still had to learn Town Hall’s basic office procedures. All cases underwent a strict processing system; everything had to be planned, and everything had to be approved. On Misato’s first day, it had been drilled into him that the system was necessary in order to ensure that all decisions were fair. No matter how small the assignment, employees had to write up a plan, then submit it to their superiors for authorization.

“It’s about the job that someone called in yesterday. Could yeh come look at this?” Tsujimoto said, beckoning him over.

Misato reached out to take the proffered documents and scanned them. The job was located around twenty minutes away from the office, in an old village that had become part of Tomoe during some large-scale municipal mergers a while back.

“A haunting, huh?” Misato hummed. He quickly read through the application form that Tsujimoto had filled out on behalf of the complainant. “All right. I’d be happy to take this on,” he said, nodding in confirmation.

“I’m a li’l hesitant to ask this so early on, but...could yeh take care of it alone? I was planning to come with yeh, but something came up,” Tsujimoto said apologetically. His accent was strong and quite obviously local. The Hiroshima dialect was known for sounding harsh and “angry,” but like all accents, it imparted a different affect depending on the speaker’s individual tone. In Tsujimoto’s case, he spoke in a kind, neutral manner that wasn’t overtly masculine or feminine.

“Understood. Oh, uh... How should I introduce myself to the client again...?” Misato wondered.

Tomoe Town Hall sorted natural disasters into two categories: “general,” which encompassed emergencies such as earthquakes and floods, and “abnormal.” Disasters classified as “abnormal” included hauntings and unrest caused by beings from the spiritual world. However, despite the heavy presence of spirits in the region, not many citizens viewed the Abnormal Disaster Unit favorably.

Hell, even the other departments don’t respect us.

That said, people who'd been living in Tomoe for a while were at least aware of a division at the town hall that dealt with "paranormal stuff." That was common knowledge that had been around for decades. And Misato had heard that the shrine workers and other religious leaders in the area fully acknowledged the unit's work.

That day's client had only found out about the division after going to see a psychiatrist in town, who'd politely directed him to the Abnormal Disaster Unit instead.

"Hmm... He's from outta town, so he might not fully understand who we are..." Tsujimoto said, thinking. "Still, he'll probably get the idea if yeh introduce yehself as a Spirit Hunter. I reckon it'll be fine; I did speak to him on the phone, after all."

Abnormal Disaster Unit.

The name wasn't exactly inaccurate, but Misato thought it a little too euphemistic and vague. Several government offices had started giving their divisions light-hearted names recently, such as the "Health and Happiness Division" and the "Hospitality and Fun Division." Misato thought renaming their unit might help give clients a better impression of them, but he would keep that opinion to himself for the time being.

"Got it. I'll get ready to leave, then," Misato said, sauntering over to his desk to gather his things.

For the past month, Misato had been shadowing Tsujimoto whenever they went out on missions. He would be going out on a job alone for the very first time. There were still a lot of things he wasn't one hundred percent familiar with, so he would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous, but...*anything* was better than repetitive, mind-numbing office work. It wasn't even ten a.m. yet, and Misato was already sick of doing data entry.

"Oh, right. Tsujimoto?" Misato called, holding an old-style telephone receiver to his ear. His finger hovered over the button that routed calls to an external phone line.

"Aye?"

"Should I change before I go?" he asked, fiddling with the collar of his exceedingly crimson jacket.

For some reason, the jackets supplied by Town Hall were bright red with bold, black stripes. When Misato first received his, he couldn't quite believe his eyes. Ryouji, on the other hand, had been ecstatic when he saw it. According to him, it was "so freakin'

cool!” but Misato wasn’t sure if being complimented by someone with his sort of fashion sense was necessarily a good thing.

Employees in other divisions of the General Affairs Department wore proper suits because they frequently interacted with the general populace. The Abnormal Disaster Unit’s office was hidden away from the public eye though, so most members dressed in simple pants and polo shirts under their work jackets. Misato usually did the same. But if he was going to be making a formal visit to a citizen’s house, perhaps he should’ve worn formal attire to match.

“Nah, yeh’re fine like that. Oh, but don’t be surprised if random people come up to yeh. The jacket makes yeh stand out, so be careful—especially with that hairstyle. Yeh won’t do much good if someone ropes yeh into an engineering job,” Tsujimoto chuckled.

No matter which division a municipal employee worked for, members of the public often approached them on the street to enlist their help, calling out “Look, they’re from Town Hall!” New recruits were advised to not engage.

If that was going to happen to Misato, he would much rather change. He seriously considered it for a moment, but the notion of basically admitting defeat bothered him. In the end, when he climbed into the car provided for him, he was still wearing the bright red jacket.

BY the end of April, the sakura trees across the mountains had already bloomed and shed their petals, and pale green leaves were starting to bud in their place. At that time of year spirits were especially troublesome. Evil spirits were beginning to awake from their wintertime slumber, and people were particularly vulnerable to possession, their judgment clouded by the energy of spring.

Splendid rays of sunlight beat down from the blue sky as Misato drove toward the client’s house, and the mountains looked like brilliant flashes of vibrant green as he passed them by. He was heading north on National Route 54, a highway that led to Shimane Prefecture. It stretched right from Hiroshima City all the way to Izumo in Shimane, making it a cross-prefectural road.

As Misato traveled farther north, the incline grew steeper, and

the seasons seemed to rewind right before his eyes. The distribution of greenery grew increasingly sparse the deeper he went into the mountains.

He drove through the center of an old village, then ascended to the highest point of the road, noting how different the color of the leaves was up close. From Tomoe, the mountains appeared so vivid that no one could miss the overwhelmingly pea-green scenery if they tried. In the midst of it, however, it was more like he was surrounded by a faint white mist with a single drop of green paint mixed in.

Eventually, he reached an intersection with no traffic lights and turned down a side road. There were no white lines to mark its center, but it was wide enough for two cars to pass each other. He wove between houses and water-filled paddy fields along a mountain ridge, before yet another, even narrower drive branched off from the road. Misato hesitantly turned onto it. If any cars were to approach from the opposite direction, both vehicles would be in trouble. The road twisted and turned as it passed through the mountains, taking Misato farther and farther up the slopes.

“Is there really a house up here...?” he murmured absentmindedly, doubtful.

Out the window he could see what looked like abandoned fields dotted along a valley. Then the mountains closed in on both sides, and the road took a sharp turn. Misato worried that it might lead to a dead end.

Fortunately, on the other side of the bend the road opened up again, more small fields tracing alongside it. The tall, withered grass and slender trees were still recovering from the harsh cold of winter, adding to an already lonely atmosphere. Finally, at the very end of the road, a snug-looking, Japanese-style house materialized in Misato’s field of view. That had to be the client’s house.

“Come to think of it, I think the paperwork said the house had been relocated...” Misato recalled.

The client was a potter in his mid-twenties who had only just moved there from the city last year. He’d told Tsujimoto on the phone about what appeared to be a young girl in white clothing who visited the house every night.

First, she would knock on the front door. If nobody answered, the knocking continued all night, up until the first light of dawn. When the man couldn’t bear it anymore, he eventually shouted out

to her. Although the knocking would stop, she never responded to any of the questions he asked her.

Luckily, she didn't seem incredibly threatening, nor did she try to break down the door or the like. Nonetheless, hardly anyone would be able to live in peace simply knowing that something non-human was at their front door night after night.

Misato pulled up next to the man's house, where the road came to an end. He picked up the briefcase of documents he'd thrown on the passenger seat and double-checked that he was wearing his ID card around his neck. With anxiety clear on his face, he climbed out of the car.

Suddenly he felt something squirm in his stomach.

Caught off guard, Misato involuntarily clutched at his lower abdomen.

If it's reacting, there must be something nasty here...

"Not now," Misato pleaded through gritted teeth. "I'm working."

His stomach felt like it was being turned inside out, and he knitted his eyebrows together in discomfort.

"Come on, just go back to sleep. There, there. Be good..." he whispered in a soothing tone. Then, without further ado, he marched forward with feigned confidence, locking the car behind him.

"...I understand. I might need to ask you some more questions at a later date, but if you have no idea why this might have happened, it's possible the spirit has something to do with the property," Misato explained to the client. "Next, I'll carry out a survey of the area. As a temporary measure, I'll put up some talismans around your house, all right?"

Having addressed all the questions outlined on his checklist, he tucked the form into his briefcase. He smiled at the haggard-looking man, hoping it would convey at least some reassurance.

The young potter had told Misato about how he had never been suited to working in an office and started online trading in order to save up money to make his own kiln. As expected of someone in his profession, he was rather introverted and seemed to

have quite the obsessive personality. However, based on what Misato had heard, it didn't sound like the haunting was in any way related to the man himself.

Fortunately, Misato's first solo job was going as planned. Although he was still nervous, armed with Tsujimoto's advice and the contents of the manual he'd been given, he could power through.

There were several qualities necessary for handling civilian complaints, but the most important was to carefully listen to the client. It was common for people to become confused or emotional. Misato had seen Tsujimoto struggle to get a straight answer many times, so he was grateful that the potter was relatively calm. The man quietly listened to Misato's explanations and didn't give him any weird looks when he pulled out a pile of talismans. In fact, that only proved just how desperate he was for help.

Misato retrieved a compass from his briefcase, consulting it as he recited a mantra of exorcism and stuck the talismans to the appropriate walls. He pressed one to the front door last, then turned to look at the man again and fished yet another talisman out of his briefcase. Encased in a laminated paper sleeve, this talisman had its own protective packaging.

"Now that girl shouldn't bother you anymore. But if she *does* come knocking at the door again, use this," Misato instructed, passing it to him along with a printout from the office. "Hold the talisman tightly and chant this mantra until the knocking stops: '*Om Marichiyeh Svaha.*' All of this is written on that piece of paper, by the way. Now, if you want to be prepared..."

He demonstrated how to hide one's presence using incantations and indicated where on the page the man could find the same directions accompanied by colorful illustrations. And though the man listened to him seriously, Misato was acutely aware of how bizarre the situation would look to an outsider. The idea of someone from the town hall visiting citizens to teach them mantras from an office printout was undeniably hilarious.

"All right. With that, you should be okay. I'll be back tomorrow to see how you're doing," Misato said with a bow as he left.

He walked back to the car, tossing his briefcase onto the passenger seat, then paused.

"I really think this has something to do with the location..." he

mused as he looked back at the old house. He had no actual proof, but his gut instincts were rarely wrong.

It wasn't a place humans should live.

SINCE ancient times it had been established that humans lived on one "side," and spirits on an "other side." Usually, the boundary that divided the two took the form of a mountain ridge or river—a natural feature that prevented people from easily moving back and forth across the different realms.

Human communities had an inborn tendency to label others as either "one of us" or "outsiders" depending on which side of the divide those others lived, regardless of whether they were human or not. Anyone or anything who came from the Other Side was deemed an Outsider.

Humans did not tolerate Outsiders whatsoever.

Whether god or demon, whether the beings came bearing good fortune or disaster... Humans were unwilling to embrace that which might disrupt the balance of their world.

MISATO was at the old village's branch office looking through records and documents. He stretched his neck to the side and rotated his shoulder, which popped with a resounding *crack*. Automatically, he looked around in chagrin, but there was no one there to apologize to. The isolated office was quiet in the first place, and in the archive room all the way at the back of the building, there wasn't another soul in sight. The cabinets full of paperwork were Misato's only company in the dim, silent room.

The government kept documents about Old Tomoe's temples, shrines, and legends at the main office building in central Tomoe, but they didn't have enough space to store absolutely everything there. Because the village had only become part of Tomoe due to municipal mergers, records pertaining to the surrounding area were housed in the local administrative offices and its library instead.

Misato picked out a sample of documents relating to folklore and religion in the region. He even looked up the locations of small

shrines and stone Buddhist sculptures, as well as what exactly they were enshrining. He didn't want to pick out too many to start with, though—just enough for him to memorize their main contents. With that thought in mind, he dropped the stack of papers onto a reading desk.

"It's marked as a dangerous spot on the hazard map..." Misato muttered as he traced a finger across the map spread out in front of him. He thought back to the state of the house he had just visited. "Well, that makes sense."

The house was wedged into a narrow valley with two mountains looming on both sides. It was obvious why there were no other houses nearby; the property was a disaster waiting to happen.

Just as he was mulling over which file to study next, his work phone began to ring. He rushed to flip it open. The caller ID read *Manager Yoshida*—one of Misato's bosses. Misato had made a call to the main office as soon as he finished at the client's house, and Yoshida must've uncovered some more information.

"Hello, Miyazawa? It's Yoshida. I spoke to a correspondent from Raienji, and it turns out they've had problems with one of those mountains before," he said, sighing.

Toshimi Yoshida was a Shugendo medium in his early fifties, known for his pleasant character, honesty, and extensive knowledge. He spoke in a monotonous but clear tone of voice, with a slight local accent, although he didn't have quite the same burl as Tsujimoto's. He was the manager of the Abnormal Disaster Unit, and everyone in the office trusted him and his abilities a great deal.

Raienji was a historic Buddhist temple situated close to the village, and the chief priests there had reputedly been performing exorcisms in the area for generations. Yoshida had promised to contact them as quickly as possible when Misato called with his initial report.

"They had to dig up some records from quite a while back, but listen to this: in a district on the other side of the mountain, there were reports of an ogress who ate villagers alive," Yoshida recounted.

According to Yoshida, the account originated from the sixteenth century, back when the Mori and Amago clans were fighting over a road to the Iwami Ginzan silver mine.

At the post station at the foot of the mountain pass, a singularly beautiful dancer was working as a spy for the Amago

clan. She had an exquisite voice, and her dancing was unmatched. In addition to her talents, she'd been blessed with a grace and presence that commoners seldom possessed, which made it very easy for her to gather lots of information about the Mori clan to leak back to the Amago.

The dancer courted a great number of men, and among them was a young man who was particularly passionate about her. She turned him down every time he tried to win her affections, but secretly, she truly did have feelings for him.

At some point, a small mistake exposed her true identity, and everyone discovered her deception. For some reason however, the villagers also pinned false charges on the man in love with her, and he was punished alongside the dancer. Despite being on the verge of death, the two of them managed to escape the villagers' torture and disappeared into the mountains.

"After that, reports arose one after another of people being attacked by an ogress while traveling the road late at night. Whenever the ogress sighted any of the villagers, she mauled them to death. Due to the significant number of casualties the chief priest of Raienji at the time sealed the monster away. Looking at the map, our client's house appears to be at the foot of the very mountain the ogress and her lover took refuge in," Yoshida explained.

"So...that means it's highly likely the spirit showing up at his front door is that same ogress—the one who used to be a dancing girl," Misato surmised. "But from what I heard, it doesn't sound like the spirit has any ill intentions."

Yoshida hummed in agreement before he asked, "Did you manage to talk to the people at the branch office?"

"Oh, yes," Misato replied politely. He hadn't come there just to investigate the archives. When he first told Yoshida that he had misgivings about the location, Yoshida advised him to check in with the branch office to ask if there had been any issues between the client and the other locals. "There hasn't been any outright fighting, but... Well, there *have* been rumors about a 'weirdo' moving in. The staff here said they don't know many details, but...apparently, he was *reluctant* to join the neighborhood council, and that was when his application to move into the main village area fell through."

"Hmm, that checks out," Yoshida said in thought.

Unlike renting an apartment in a big city, creating and cultivating relationships with one's neighbors was extremely

important in countryside villages. Luckily, Misato and Ryouji had sidestepped that necessity, if only because all their neighbors' houses were empty. Their solitary home might *feel* distant from the human world, but in the client's case, he was living beyond the boundary entirely.

"Because of that, they suggested the plot of land on the Other Side, I suppose," Yoshida guessed.

In other words, because the man refused to become one of them, the villagers had ostracized him in turn.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Rural society highly valued socializing with neighbors, and in some cases, it could become rather tedious. Misato could understand why a young, artsy man like his client would balk at taking part.

On the other hand, choosing to take on neighborhood responsibilities was synonymous with helping to maintain the village's sense of community. And having rejected that community, the man was being treated as an Outsider by the local people. Perhaps that was why the ogress was targeting him.

"We know that the ogress killed any villager she saw, regardless of their gender. The tale also goes that she still wanders the mountains looking for the man who ran away with her. Apparently, he came to the village as a roving merchant, so the local people weren't very accepting of him either. From the ogress's point of view, our client probably resembles her lover," Yoshida theorized.

Meanwhile, Misato had begun to put the documents he'd borrowed back in order. With a clearer idea of what was going on, they probably wouldn't need to do much more research.

It was almost noon.

Yoshida had asked Raienji to collaborate with the unit to resolve the issue, since they had information on how a chief priest had originally subdued the ogress. She was supposed to be sealed inside a burial mound in the mountains, but it sounded like the temple hadn't checked on it recently. Misato suspected they would find that the seal had weakened over the years.

Yoshida said that he would take over the case himself along with another experienced staff member. In the end, he simply thanked Misato for his work and asked him to return to the main office.

“...An Outsider, huh?” Misato murmured to himself as he folded his phone screen back down.

Profession, appearance, behavior... There were many things which could separate someone from the societal norm. In addition to its more literal interpretation, the word “outsider” encompasses a range of deeper meanings. Misato couldn’t help but remember his first day at work, when he’d arrived at the meeting room late and found everyone staring at him.

His knuckles turned white around the phone.

AFTER receiving Misato’s report, the Abnormal Disaster Unit got to work.

Operating under the assumption that the ogress was the spirit knocking at his door, they questioned the client again. He divulged that he often hiked the mountain behind his house in search of raw materials for his ceramics. He had no memory of ever breaking something that resembled a seal, but there was a high possibility his walks had somehow triggered her release.

The ogress would be resealed with the help of Raienji’s chief priest and several employees from the Disaster Unit. Unfortunately, Misato was no longer on that part of the case and had been entrusted with the client’s safety instead.

When Misato informed him of the situation and asked how he felt, the young man said he wanted to move again. Even if they successfully subdued the ogress, he couldn’t bear to live there any longer. He did like the type of soil in the area, however, and therefore preferred to remain within Tomoe Prefecture. For the time being, the unit had decided to offer him public housing as a temporary refuge. The role of making arrangements for the potter’s new home fell to Misato.

Honestly, he was dissatisfied. Despite the fact that his position ostensibly called for specialist knowledge and abilities, they kept piling paperwork on him rather than giving him an opportunity to

test his skills. And what was even more distress-inducing...

He would have to interact with other departments.

He wrote up a report of the client's situation and passed it along to the Property Administration Division for approval. The approval itself could be carried out online, but they had to physically check the client's application, which meant Misato would have to take the documents over to whoever was in charge of the Property Division.

Unlike Misato's decrepit, old office, the Property Administration office was in the new building and was light and airy. There weren't as many citizens around as there would be in the Citizen Affairs Department, but it wasn't unusual to see nonemployees in the space.

Misato felt his body go rigid.

He saw none other than his ex-classmate, Hirose, sitting at the counter, the universe rubbing salt in his wound. He'd counted himself lucky that he hadn't seen Hirose since orientation, but clearly his luck had just run out.

"Hello there," Misato called out cheerily, doing his best to put on a brave face. Hirose looked up from his desk. "Um... My client wants to move into public housing. It's urgent, so I'd really appreciate it if you could take a look at the paperwork as soon as possible."

As soon as Hirose recognized Misato, his face turned sour.

So Misato hadn't been imagining it before. He must have done something to really upset Hirose. Either that, or Hirose wanted to pretend they were strangers because of how much he stood out.

Frankly, Misato didn't quite know how to proceed, so he simply waited with a forced smile plastered on his face. Eventually, Hirose reluctantly got to his feet and silently picked up the binder of application papers from the counter.

"All right. Thanks," Hirose muttered, his voice so low that Misato wasn't one hundred percent sure he'd actually said it.

"S-Sure..." Misato replied.

Help. I can't think of a single thing to say to him.

He gave up on making conversation and decided to just leave.

The moment he turned around, he found himself face-to-face with a confident-looking man wearing a suit. Misato was instantly on guard. If the man was the sort of guy to mouth off to civil servants, Misato was in trouble. But when the man's gaze flitted

through his black-rimmed glasses to Misato's ID card, a smile suddenly appeared on his lips.

"Oooh, I know you," he said. "I've heard the rumors. You're that new'un from the Abnormal Disaster Unit, aren'tcha? The top player!"

"The...*top* player?" Misato blinked in confusion, tilting his head to the side. That was the last thing he'd expected the man to say.

Why's he talking like I'm a baseball pitcher or something?

As Misato stood there blankly, the man's smile stretched wider and he gave Misato a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Yoshida tol' me you're the best Shinto priest they've got," he explained. "I'm around a lot for building site purification and settin' up framework, so I reckon you'll be seein' more of me."

Presumably, he worked in construction: the industry tended to be rather superstitious, so it made sense that their staff had frequent contact with the Abnormal Disaster Unit.

"O-Oh, I see. I look forward to working with you," Misato mumbled in reply.

Something about his response was evidently amusing, because the man gave him one final, hard slap on the back along with a hearty chortle. "I hafta say, though—there might be a lot of talented people in the Abnormal Disaster Unit, but it's rare they find an all-rounder like you. Everyone's got high hopes for ya, so keep up the good work." The man grinned, leaving Misato with those warm words before continuing on his way to the Construction Division's counter.

The Construction Manager emerged from the back and bowed to the man as he approached. Judging by that interaction alone, it was safe to say that the man was in a position of high authority. As Misato observed them, he suddenly had the feeling he was being watched himself and turned to look at the Property Administration counter once more. Immediately, his eye met Hirose's.

"...Miyazawa," Hirose called quietly.

"Yes?" Misato replied, bracing himself for the worst as he stiffly walked back over to the counter.

"Have you always been...like *that*?" Hirose asked.

Misato could only assume Hirose was referring to his spiritual power. If that was the case, then the answer was an unequivocal "yes." Misato gave a humble nod.

"Hm. Right," Hirose said curtly before leaving his seat and disappearing into the back.

"He really does hate me..." Misato sighed, his shoulders drooping in dejection. With a heavy sensation in the pit of his stomach, he began to make his way back to the unit office.

At least everyone in the Abnormal Disaster Unit had similar jobs. Even if Misato couldn't share every single detail about himself with them, there he wasn't an Outsider. There, he could actually find somewhere to belong.

I'm gonna work as hard as I can...!

The faster he adapted to life on the team, the better. He had to avoid slipups at all costs.

As Misato hurried from the room as though trying to flee his entire situation, Hirose stared intently after him from behind the break room door. However, walking with his eyes trained on his feet, Misato didn't notice a thing.

IT was the dead of night when Ryouji arrived home after finishing a late shift at the bar. Figuring his lodger was already in dreamland, he closed the car door as softly as he could.

Yet, in addition to the light he'd left on before leaving for work, he could see another faint glow emanating from the western side of the estate. The light was coming from the far side of the main house, the storehouse and hills that formed the west boundary of the garden illuminated by the building between. Evidently, the lights were still on in the outbuilding. Unable to suppress his curiosity, Ryouji headed toward the courtyard to see what his lodger was doing up so late.

Misato Miyazawa had been living at Ryouji's house for almost a month. He appeared to have no qualms with the place, despite the fact that the garden was crawling with specters; in fact, he seemed quite fond of his new home. He probably drove away the sorts of paranormal troublemakers that liked to mess with humans, but otherwise he had never once exorcised the ghostly presences that roamed the western side of the estate. It was difficult to believe that he didn't possess the skill to deal with them, so Ryouji could only assume he was letting them linger by choice.

Ryouji took off his sunglasses to navigate more easily in the dark, hooking them on the neckline of his shirt. Following the dim trail of light, he skirted around the outside of the main house, and sure enough, the paper sliding doors lining the outbuilding shone a muted white. Ryouji could see a silhouette pacing back and forth behind the doors.

He was hesitant to try to strike up a conversation in the middle of the night, but due to their conflicting schedules they were rarely able to talk in-depth.

His mind made up, Ryouji picked his way through the overgrown courtyard, then sat down on the edge of the open veranda. The tenant must have heard him approaching, because not long afterward the inner door slid open a crack. Ryouji glanced around to see that the handsome young man was on his knees and peering through the outer glass door.

"Hey, buddy. You're up late, aren'tcha?" Ryouji said with a casual wave.

Miyazawa was wearing a padded kimono over disheveled pajamas, and his long hair cascaded over his shoulders. He eyed Ryouji with a puzzled look on his face as he pulled the glass door open.

Maybe he only got up to take a dump.

"I could say the same to you, Mr. Karino. How was work?" Miyazawa asked with a small bow of his head, sliding the door further open as if inviting Ryouji inside.

Although the weather had brightened by the end of April, the nights were still cold, and the area was prone to frost. It would be rude to force his lodger to sit in the cold air, so Ryouji swiftly accepted his invitation, moving to enter the room. He noticed a talisman attached to the pillar just outside the door.

"It was all right, thanks," Ryouji replied. "By the way, you don't have to call me 'mister' or nothin'. Just call me Ryouji. And you're...uh...Misato, was it? I'm not the sorta guy to be a stickler for politeness, y'know. It feels weird. We're basically the same age, anyway."

Once Ryouji stepped inside, he was impressed by how tidy and clean the room was. The futon was laid out neatly on one side of the space, and a simple coffee table stood in the middle. It was clear that Misato had been raised in a well-to-do household with good manners drilled into him. His tidy way of living was but one

example; even the polite manner in which he'd opened the door made it obvious he'd been taught to act with grace.

Ryouji still didn't know where Misato came from nor his family's exact circumstances. That didn't really bother him, though, and he was well aware of how uncomfortable it could be when people attempted to pry.

"O-Okay," Misato haltingly agreed. "Ryouji, then. Did you want to talk to me about something?"

"Nah, nothin' in particular. I was just curious 'cause you're not usually up this late. I mean, we don't get to talk very often. You don't have to get up for anythin' tomorrow, right? I just thought I should drop by and see how you're findin' things," he said with a smile.

It was a Friday night, the start of a busy weekend for Ryouji, especially since he would have to be at work again the following evening. In contrast, Misato worked in an office, which meant his Saturdays should be free.

While Misato locked the outer patio door and closed the inner sliding one, Ryouji settled down on a cushion next to the coffee table. Misato looked a little unsure of what to do with himself, but he didn't show any signs of wanting Ryouji gone, at least.

"So, how's your new home?" Ryouji inquired as he looked around the small room.

"Very comfortable, thank you," Misato answered, kneeling on the nearby futon.

"Glad to hear it. Though, I gotta say..." Ryouji leaned forward, pushing the inner door slightly open again. "You've got some strange tastes, don'tcha? Why'd you leave the courtyard like that?"

In the light spilling out through the gap, they could see several shadows dancing around the pond. A mountain stream emptied into the pond, washing specters down into the courtyard.

"O-Oh, well... It's not like they're doing me any harm. Plus, they give me something to look at when I'm bored, so I never thought to..." Misato trailed off. "I'm sorry. Should I get rid of them?"

In return for charging cheaper rent, Ryouji had asked Misato to help with the estate's maintenance. It appeared that Misato was worried he'd violated that agreement, judging by the hint of panic visible in his eyes while he spoke.

Ryouji shook his head calmly. "Nah. As long as they're not

causin' you any trouble, it doesn't matter. Before you moved in, there used to be this huge old thing that came at night to wreak havoc on the place, but I haven't seen it lately," Ryouji said. "Guys our age usually like to party in their free time, though. Can't say I've ever met a guy into *yokai* zoos before." He snickered.

"Yokai zoos?" Misato echoed, laughing at the absurdity of the idea.

"Am I wrong?" Ryouji demanded.

When he pulled the inner door shut again, another hanging talisman caught his eye. The last one he'd seen was on a pillar outside, but this one was *inside*. Misato followed his line of sight and tensed upon realizing what he was staring at.

"O-Oh, I..." Misato began nervously.

"Hey, Misato," Ryouji interrupted. "Are you pretty good at makin' those?" He pointed to the talisman.

"I guess," Misato said, blinking.

"Great!" Ryouji exclaimed, leaning toward him with a twinkle in his eye. "Forget about cleanin' up the specters outside. Instead, could you stick some of those all around the house? It's been pretty quiet recently, but there's this trickster that keeps on rattlin' the storm shutters at the back of the main building. It's really startin' to tick me off." Ryouji tutted. "Y'see, my training wasn't exactly top class. If I can grab hold of a spirit and whack it, then I know what I'm doin'. But I'm no good with that complex preventative stuff."

When Ryouji was a child, a man who claimed to be a tengu had taken him in. He couldn't remember anything before then—who he was, how he'd gotten there...nothing. His adoptive father raised him, and he grew up traveling back and forth between the mountains and the outskirts of Tokyo. Although he'd learned some Shugendo rituals with the help of his tengu father and by piecing together common knowledge of such rites, some things just didn't gel with his personality. He couldn't get his head around tasks that involved precision and delicacy, like making talismans or forming mystical barriers.

Misato nodded. "S-Sure. I can do that."

"Nice," Ryouji replied, slapping his knees with a sense of satisfaction. His sunglasses clacked together as he moved, reminding him that he hadn't put them back on. He quickly unhooked them from his shirt and pushed them onto his nose. "I can tell you've had a pretty good education," he continued. "You

don't have to answer if you don't wanna, but where are you from?"

An uncharacteristic curiosity had suddenly bubbled up inside him. How did an onmyoji with such a prestigious education end up with no familial support? Why did Misato have so little money that he'd been on the verge of homelessness? Why did he stick talismans not only to the outside of his home, but to the *inside* as well?

"Um, well..." Misato began hesitantly. "I grew up learning Shintoism. In elementary school and middle school, I lived in Shimane Prefecture. But Ryouji... You're from Tokyo, right? How did you even find this house?"

"Yeah, that's right. A friend told me about this place. I guess you could say that it...came into my possession. Welp, either way, I think it was meant to be. I needed a change of pace, and the countryside's just the place for that."

Misato had skillfully dodged Ryouji's question. Admittedly, Ryouji had done the same, so they still only knew the most superficial information about each other.

I guess I'm fine with that, though.

"True," Misato agreed, a huge yawn escaping him as he spoke.

Ryouji took that as his cue to leave and stood up with another slap to his knees. "Anyway, sorry for botherin' you so late at night. I'll just come back in the morning to pick up my shoes," Ryouji said, padding across the room to another door in the far wall. It opened into the passageway to the main house.

"Mm, sure," Misato replied languidly.

Ryouji turned the walkway lights on, then closed the door softly behind him so as not to disturb his lodger any further.

Chapter 3: The Piano's Song

IT was late evening, the hour just approaching midnight. Misato was in his pajamas, padding along the northern corridor of the main house to the bathroom, which was in a separate building. The passageway overlooked an overgrown garden at the very back of the Karino residence, the plot mostly reclaimed by nature.

Years before, the bath would've effectively been a bucket of water heated from underneath, but it had been remodeled to suit the times. The adjoining dressing room was home to a large sink and a washing machine, and the bathtub itself was big enough for Misato to stretch his legs out.

Although it was a very old house, because it had been consistently occupied until about ten years prior, the facilities had been routinely updated. The toilet was Western style with a proper plumbing system, and the built-in kitchen had new appliances and wood flooring. Misato was relieved that the most important rooms had been modernized at the very least.

He opened the window in the dressing room to the sound of light rain pattering on the overgrown weeds and bushes outside. There was another large window next to the bathtub. The ability to take a bath with an unobstructed view of nature was a luxury that not many homes afforded. Plus, living in the middle of the isolated countryside meant he didn't have to worry about anyone ogling him through the window.

"That garden sure is in a terrible state, huh...?" he mumbled absentmindedly as he popped his head outside, looking around.

If the garden had been tended properly, Misato imagined it would be a charming, picturesque backdrop that would enhance his bathing experience tenfold. However, in its current state, it looked more like a horror movie set than a postcard. Not to mention, there really *were* ghosts out there.

Frogs croaked and crickets chirped amid the sound of rainfall. If Misato strained his ears, he could hear something else rustling in the darkness. Most likely it was the troublemaker Ryouji had

complained about the other day.

According to Ryouji, the specter wasn't exactly malevolent, but rather mischievous: it liked to tease humans for fun and was partial to banging on doors, clawing at window frames, and generally causing a huge ruckus. It kept up a relentless racket even when Ryouji ignored it, as if mocking him.

That night, however, it was as though the spirit was holding its breath and pretending not to be there at all. It hid among the untamed bushes, whose leaves were growing denser as summer drew closer.

Without warning, a nasty squirming sensation ran through Misato's gut. He bit his lip, his eyebrows furrowing in pain as he stumbled back from the window. *It* had registered the specter's presence, slithering around inside him violently.

All of a sudden, a blazing heat flared up under his left shoulder blade. The spirit in the shadowed yard trembled in response.

"No," Misato reprimanded firmly. "You're not allowed out."

Apparently, *it* wasn't pleased about that, because it writhed inside him even more intensely, making a show of its discontent. It didn't let up for a while, but eventually the wriggling died down. Hopefully *it* had given up. At last, Misato released his white-knuckle grip on the window frame and breathed a giant sigh of relief. He stretched out his spine, finally able to relax again after overcoming his internal struggle.

Ever since arriving in Tomoe, the...*occupant* in his stomach had been more active than usual. Perhaps the sheer density of spirits in the mountains was difficult for it to ignore.

He closed and locked the window. He was regretting needlessly rousing its curiosity. In truth, he had only come to the bathroom to put up some talismans to ward off evil spirits.

At the beginning of April he'd crafted a bunch of talismans and was making use of his Golden Week hanging them up around the estate just as Ryouji had asked. Golden Week was a holiday that ran from the end of April until early May, so it was the longest period he would have off of work for a while. That night the plan was to replace the ones he'd put up at the back of the estate the month before. The overgrown garden was where the majority of specters appeared, so he'd made it his priority.

"Not having to pay rent is great and all, but at this point I feel like I should be getting paid more than the rent's worth in the first

place,” he grumbled to himself as he unwrapped a talisman from its protective cover and stuck it to the window. He removed the old one and slid it inside his pajama sleeve. His left shoulder blade seized up at the sudden movement, and he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

Ryouji was on late shift that night. No one else was around. No one would question him if he let *it* out... The issue was whether he could catch it again before Ryouji got home.

By nature, mediums existed in a space between the realm of the supernatural and the world of the living. From the average human’s point of view, mediums belonged to the Other Side, as did the things they saw and the rituals they carried out. Because to normal humans, psychics were *different*.

Though in my case, that’s definitely true.

Misato could never fully live among humans. Hiding on the very edge of liminality, he could only just manage the pretense that he was a regular human in order to survive his day-to-day life.

Because something terrible lurked inside him.

WHEN Misato was in middle school, he used to pass an abandoned elementary school building on his way to class. It had fallen into complete ruin, its wooden walls decaying after more than ten years of dereliction.

Although many of his classmates walked to school together in the morning, most of them were busy with club activities or private tutoring after school, so everyone went home independently. Misato was all alone on the country road home, clutching his school bag in one hand and holding up an umbrella in the other. Shielding himself from the late winter rain, he stopped in his tracks just outside the condemned building.

He could hear a piano.

A progression of fleeting notes sounded, but he didn’t recognize the tune. In fact, he wasn’t sure it was a tune to begin with; someone could have been just pressing keys at random.

There was a small, bubbling river alongside the narrow road as well as a few fields, and because it was the off-season for farmers Misato was the only soul in sight.

Maybe the old grounds were mowed from time to time—or maybe they weren't—but at the moment, withered stems and branches straggled across the lawn, wintertime having stolen their leaves. About half of the place had been reclaimed by the mountains, it seemed.

With a stealthy glance to either side of his umbrella, Misato confirmed that he was truly alone. Then, with careful footsteps, he sneaked into the deserted school building...

WHY am I thinking about something that happened ten years ago?

Perhaps the continuous drizzle of the early summer rain had brought the memory to the surface. It was definitely *not* the result of his mind beginning to wander after having been on the phone for almost two hours, listening to the same thing over and over again. Definitely not.

At first, he'd cordially listened to the citizen's "concerns," taking notes, but after hearing them for the fifth time, he was starting to lose his grip on reality.

"...Yes, of course. Well then, I'll conduct a survey of the area myself, and... No, I'll be in touch as soon as possible... Yes, that's all fine. I understand. All right—we'll speak later. Bye for now. Yep. Bye." He put on his most convincing "I'm-putting-the-phone-down-now" voice and checked that the call had ended before finally returning the receiver to its stand.

He noticed that the back side of the notepaper wedged under his right hand was filled with various doodles.

"Hey, Miyazawa. Make sure yeh burn whatever yeh've created there..." Tsujimoto remarked, catching a glimpse of the page as he passed by.

Huh?

When he looked at it again, he saw that the paper resembled a talisman, although he hadn't drawn it on purpose.

He shook out his left arm, attempting to dispel the heavy, stiff sensation caused by holding the phone for two hours. Casting his eyes up at the clock on the wall, he realized that it was almost time to go home. The days were long at that time of year, but already it was getting dark: barely any daylight was filtering through the

thick clouds enveloping the sky.

He dropped his pen next to the pseudo-talisman and rested his hand on the computer mouse in front of him. He shook it a little, the black laptop screen lighting up. The window in the middle of the screen informed him that his session had timed out.

Typical.

He'd been right in the middle of typing up a document, too.

Contractually, he was allowed to leave at that point, but he still had five more applications to finish. He regarded the application forms lying in front of his laptop and heaved a deep sigh. With dramatic reluctance he dragged open the desk drawer and selected another blank form. He filled it out with the details he'd heard a few too many times on the phone and stamped the date with red ink.

"Yoshida," Misato called out. "A call came in. Apparently, they *need* us to come see them tomorrow *no matter what*. They even threatened to hang themselves if we didn't."

He handed the form to Yoshida, exhaustion plain on his face. Scanning it, Yoshida soon gave a nod of realization.

"Oh, it's them..." He grimaced. "This client calls about once every six months, and it's always an 'emergency.' But when we show up, it's never actually a big deal. Still, I'll call them myself, just to be safe," he said with another firm nod.

Misato bowed deeply in gratitude, then floated unsteadily back to his desk.

"Miyazawa sure drew the short straw this time," a colleague said, grinning apologetically.

Misato replied with a strained smile. Apparently, there were a handful of clients like the one he'd battled with that afternoon, though it seemed that one was particularly infamous at the office. It seemed like the client was somewhat infamous at the office. At least it made for good conversation.

Misato logged back into the digital records system with weary fingers. While he worked, the conversation turned to the employees' own lives and families.

There were around ten people in the Abnormal Disaster Unit in total, and Misato was the only one who wasn't married. The majority of them were over the age of thirty-five, so topics such as kids and school were usually focal points. Tsujimoto was the third youngest out of everyone, and it wasn't as though he was especially

young. Their office's skewed age distribution was just about proportional to the average company's, however, due to the fact that so many firms were recruiting fewer and fewer graduates. Unable to relate to his colleagues, Misato simply filed paperwork in silence, letting their voices drift in one ear and out the other.

BY the time he got home, the sun had long set.

Strangely, he was utterly drained. It wasn't as if he'd been running all over town or had used up all his energy on a tough exorcism. In fact, he'd been inside all day, focused solely on paperwork and taking phone calls. It was purely mental exhaustion.

He was renting two rooms at the Karino household: the thirty-two square foot Japanese-style room that he slept in and a forty-two square foot Western-style room. Altogether, he had more than double the space of the studio apartment he'd first tried to rent. The Western-style room had its own sink, and after equipping it with a fridge, microwave, and induction stovetop, he could easily cook for himself. He tried to prepare his own meals as often as possible, for his bank account's sake if nothing else, but that night...he simply couldn't muster the willpower.

Too tired to think about what to eat or where, he went straight to his bedroom. He couldn't even find the energy to get his futon out of the closet and ended up flopping directly onto the *tatami*-covered floor.

After spending a few quiet minutes merely staring at how the light reflected off the paper doors, he lethargically hauled himself to his knees. He leaned over to open the patio door, and a rush of humid, grass-scented air flowed into the room. Ever since the rainy season had begun the previous week, the sky had remained a constant, cloudy gray, dutifully living up to the name. Honestly, Misato was glad for it. He wasn't fond of the dry crispness of early summer, nor bright, aggressive sunlight.

The gentle sound of raindrops pattering against leaves and dripping into the pond filled the air. Low-lying clouds reflected the lights of the far-off town, dyeing the sky a very faint orange. There was just enough light for Misato to see the barest outline of the dim garden outside, its shadows and colors lost to the darkness.

The courtyard was small and gloomy, enclosed on three sides by the main house and outbuilding and by a stuccoed wall on the fourth. In the past, it would've been a beautiful, charming asset to the estate, with carefully pruned trees dotted around the pond. However, Misato hadn't made any effort to clean it up in the two whole months since he'd moved in, so it was still a weed-ridden mess.

A splash resounded from the pond, its timbre slightly lower than the pitter-patter of rain. Misato bent forward to get a better look; there was something frolicking in the shade of an evergreen bush, shielded from the murky light.

"Oh! Is that a new one...?"

The courtyard was quite the hangout spot for small specters. Recently brought into existence, they were only about the size of bugs or tiny animals. The mountain stream washed them away from their birthplace, and they usually ended up lurking around the pond for a while. The location of the estate constituted a natural connection to spirits, and the fact that the house had been empty for years probably attracted them there, too. In the absence of maintenance or any gardening, the courtyard was turning into a sort of ghost haven.

Misato had constructed a mystical barrier around his home to dissuade them from coming inside, but apart from that, the specters had free reign over the place. Although they were spirits of the dead, none of them harbored particularly evil will. Perhaps the larger specters had left of their own accord after detecting Misato's presence, because only small mountain spirits often visited. It was therapeutic to watch them as he let his mind wander.

When Ryouji had swung by for a check-in, he'd teased Misato for running a "yokai zoo." Fortunately, Ryouji appeared to have no problem with Misato's hobby and let him do as he pleased. He'd been told to get rid of anything that seemed dangerous, but in the past two months he had come across no malicious spirits in the area whatsoever.

The estate was huge, having once belonged to a wealthy farmer, and keeping all the troublemakers out had evidently been difficult for Ryouji on his own. That was why he'd jumped at the opportunity to rent the outbuilding to Misato as soon as they'd met. Effectively, Misato had been employed as Ryouji's watchdog.

...More like his insect repellent, if we're being realistic.

“Heh, it sure is lively out there tonight,” he said, smiling to himself.

Thanks to the continuous rain over the past few days, the stream’s water level had increased, and the range of specters along with it. Misato liked to puzzle out which variety of spirit each newcomer was. It had become somewhat of a guilty pleasure for him.

The night breeze blew softly through his clothes and caressed his bare skin. He let his eyes flutter shut in contentment as the moistness of his sticky sweat evaporated away. He leisurely listened to the pattering rainfall, croaking frogs, and the bubbling of running water. Unlike the bustle of downtown Tomoe, the estate was so quiet that it was rare to hear a single car pass by. Sometimes, in the dead of night, he could even hear owls hooting and cuckoos calling. Ryouji had warned that the deer made a lot of noise in the fall, though.

As Misato stared up at the cloudy sky, he could barely believe he was really there.

Why am I here? What am I doing in a town I have no relation to?

The answer should’ve been simple: to work. Society dictated that he had to work in order to live.

But why am I alive?

He was probably just tired. That was usually the case when he started getting hung up on weird questions.

He hadn’t moved to Tomoe expecting to make a spectacular show of his ample knowledge and talents, but...his job certainly wasn’t what he’d anticipated. Unfortunately, he had neither the funds nor the support to resign for such a reason.

When Misato graduated high school, he completely cut off contact with his family. He’d left that house with the intention to never step foot through its doors ever again. It wasn’t that he didn’t get along with his relatives, though—that wasn’t why he’d left.

He’d been born to a long lineage of onmyoji whose secret mantras were passed from parent to child. However, as the illegitimate offspring of the family’s head, Misato encountered a fair amount of hardship. Then, due to his unperfected talents, he found himself the subject of a political conflict within the family. Ultimately, he was forced to leave.

The event that led to his departure had left a deep scar on his heart. He still couldn’t bear to think about it.

Pulling himself out of his thoughts, he finally scrounged up the strength to haul himself to his feet. He peeled off his work shirt and pants, then grabbed his pajamas out of the storage bin that he used as a chest of drawers.

His undershirt rubbed uncomfortably against his left shoulder blade as he tugged it over his head. He pursed his lips as he endured the unpleasant sensation, which felt as though a hundred tiny hangnails on his back were being pushed in the wrong direction.

Given the immense fatigue already weighing on him, that was the last thing he wanted to think about.

JUST before he went to sleep, he covered a talisman in a thin layer of glue. Then he pulled at the left sleeve of his kimono, exposing his shoulder. Carefully, he reached behind himself and stuck the talisman to the bare skin of his shoulder blade.

Sometimes, the thought that he would probably be with *it* for the rest of his life sent him spiraling into depression.

He remembered the way his coworkers spoke about the toils of raising children and grumbled about things their partners had done. Standard, everyday topics. And although they often griped, their complaints were the sort made by people who were happy with their lives. Misato could only ever bring himself to “mm” or “ahh” in reply because he knew he would most likely never be able to walk that path himself. He could never have a normal life.

If he were to say that out loud, they would surely laugh at him. They would probably chastise him, too, citing the fact that he was still young or that he’d only been working for a few months.

Since coming to Tomoe, Misato hadn’t told a single soul about the creature that had been living inside him for four years. He doubted he would ever find someone he could talk to about it, regardless of where he lived.

Truthfully, seeing people in the same profession flaunt their normal, happy lives was incredibly upsetting, and at times it got the better of him. A little voice in the back of his head whispered that no matter where he went, he would always be an Outsider—even among people in the same office, doing the exact same job. The

thought chilled him to his very core, an ice-cold fear churning in the pit of his stomach.

Despite being so exhausted that he was beginning to dissociate, he didn't feel like he could fall asleep. He wrapped himself up in his thin duvet but still couldn't find that warm sensation of slumber.

He tossed and turned throughout the night, half-awake yet not quite asleep either. The sound of the rain outside brought the memory that had resurfaced earlier that day back to the forefront of his mind. He lost himself in the vision, letting the raindrops take him back ten years.

THE condemned elementary school on Misato's route home was well-known among locals to be haunted.

As was the case with most abandoned buildings, the school had its fair share of urban myths and rumors and was an exceptionally popular location for dares and mischief. Many people claimed to have sighted otherworldly beings there. Misato was experiencing something similar: he could hear piano notes spilling out from the music room of a building that was supposed to be empty.

"Is anyone there? I'm coming in..." he announced. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd bothered to do so when he *knew* no one would be inside. The door squeaked in complaint as he slid it open.

Instantly, the haphazard melody went quiet. He looked around to see the room coated in a thick layer of dust, with dense soundproofing walls and a rug spread over the floor. At the very back of the room, he could see a grand piano as well as a blackboard fixed to the wall behind it. A white, five-line musical staff had been printed on the board.

Misato made his way toward the silent piano. The lid was still shut tight over the keys, and there was no evidence of anyone having sat on the stool. Hesitantly, Misato perched on the edge of the stool himself.

"...What were you playing?" he asked the piano. As he said it, he realized that his wording was slightly off. No one else was there, so rather than being played, it was more like the piano had been

singing.

It gave no response, so Misato tried opening the lid. The keys were filthy with dust, and when he tentatively pressed one, it didn't make a sound. After however many years of desertion, that was to be expected. The piano must have lost its voice years before.

Thrummm.

All of a sudden, a low note sounded from the piano. Misato wasn't very familiar with music. He didn't know what note it was; he'd never learned how to play an instrument.

Thrummm. Dum dummm.

The note repeated a few times, as if the piano was talking to him. Misato stared at it unblinkingly, trying to work out what it was saying.

"Why did you come here?"

He heard a loud, disembodied voice ring in his ears. It sounded like a man's, tenor in pitch. Misato jumped, a scream tearing from his throat out of sheer instinct; he'd never expected someone else might be there. When he screamed, the voice only increased in volume behind him, morphing into a rich, amused chuckle.

The man placed his large hands over Misato's shoulders. Automatically, Misato jerked his neck around to look behind him and glimpsed the sleeves of a black, formal jacket covering the man's arms.

"I wonder...who was it that came up with the idea that piano spirits are beautiful ladies with long hair? In Italian, 'pianoforte' is a masculine noun!" the man complained. *"To answer your question, I was simply humming a little tune to kill the time."*

He spoke in a sing-song manner, and his voice, full of emotion, resonated throughout the room. Misato peered up into the man's face. He looked like a true gentleman, his black hair slicked back without a single strand astray. Misato thought he seemed more like an opera singer than a pianist.

"...Why? Were you bored?" Misato asked in reply.

"Well, not very many guests come to visit at this time of year. ... And the other day, a fellow from the city council was here," he recalled sagely. *"I daresay this place will be demolished by spring."*

"That's why you were singing?"

"I thought that someone might hear me and come looking. Just like you did," he said with a mischievous grin. Somehow, even his smile was musical. *"So why did you decide to come here?"*

“...I don’t know, I just...felt like something was calling me,” Misato said nervously.

“You’re rather sensitive, aren’t you, boy? Are you being bullied, perchance? Not many people would come to such a sad place all alone.” He raised an eyebrow.

Misato couldn’t help but think that the man was pretty rude for a piano. “No, nothing like that,” he said defiantly. “It’s just that everyone else is busy with clubs or cram school, so no one walks home at the same time as me.”

“In other words, you don’t partake in any clubs or suchlike?”

“Nope. I have to go home to study or train, usually.”

“Hm-hmm, I see,” the piano spirit replied with a curious quirk of his eyebrow. Slowly, he looked Misato over from head to toe. *“Would you be from the Narukami family, by any chance?”*

“You know about us?” Misato blinked. It made sense, he supposed—the piano must have been in the area for a long time.

“Of course. Around these parts, there’s not a soul who doesn’t know of your family. You’re famous even among other noble lineages! I’ve come into contact with several children descended from that branch of the family before. Is that the case with you as well?”

At that question, Misato fell silent for a moment. He was in his second year of middle school, and his family was a sore subject.

“...I’m the head’s son, but...I’m not actually part of the Narukami family,” he admitted dispiritedly. He’d always known he was an illegitimate child but had only just recently found out that the paternal fields on his birth certificate had been left blank and that his surname wasn’t actually Narukami.

“But you still inherited your father’s power, did you not? It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to appear in such a distinct form to someone,” commented the piano spirit with a bright smile, unaffected by Misato’s gloomy revelation.

The spirits that resided in nature or within vessels couldn’t maintain a physical form for very long unless someone was actually looking at them. The forms they took were not intrinsically their own but rather projected onto them as a result of both the observer’s preconceptions and the spirit’s manifested size. The stronger a spirit’s presence, the more likely that humans with lower spiritual energy would be able to sense them. Thus Misato, whose spiritual aptitude and sensitivity were extremely high, could see a semblance of even the weakest spirits. Moreover, he could see

stronger ones as clearly as he would a living being.

Misato was born with the ability to see those from the Other Side. He'd inherited it from his father, who—as he had newly discovered—wasn't even officially registered as such. The Narukamis carried the bloodline of Ryujin, the dragon god, whose direct descendants possessed particularly strong spiritual powers. That was how the story went, anyway.

“...They don't treat me badly, if that's what you're thinking. I don't hate my training either. I just...” Misato said, trailing off. Something about the day's circumstances made him feel like talking to someone. Anyone, so long as no one else could hear him, which was perhaps somewhat contradictory. Nonetheless, a piano spirit in a vacant building could be the perfect confidant in that regard.

The piano spirit rested his hands on his hips in a very teacher-like manner. So many years of being stuck in a school must've rubbed off on him. He eyed Misato doubtfully, then sighed.

It was a weekday, around noon.

The sound of a horse snorting and hooves kicking against the ground rang out across Tomoe's residential district. Under a somber sky, Misato was faced with a creature notably out of place in a modern town.

He stared at the wild spirit. Yoshida stood a few paces ahead, and despite his small stature, exuded an immensely intimidating aura as he squared off against their opponent.

Yoshida wore his red work jacket and gray pants, dressed the same as Misato. He unsheathed a dagger from the belt around his waist, the blade set in a three-pronged *vajra* hilt. Such weapons were often used in Esoteric Buddhist rituals.

Due to the low-hanging clouds it was humid as well as hot. Misato and Yoshida's long-sleeved jackets were a little heavy for the season, but confronting ghosts in short-sleeved polo shirts was too risky. Misato felt sweat trickling down his temples and wiped an arm across his forehead.

“Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!” Yoshida chanted as he sliced the air four times vertically and five times horizontally.

A wave of power sent the huge, one-eyed horse flying

backward until it collapsed in the adjacent park with a dull thud. Yoshida nimbly flipped the dagger with a quick flick of his fingers, the tip of the vajra hilt pointed toward the weakened horse spirit.

“Take control, O Vajrakilaya. Arrest this being. Invoking the fundamental vow of Acala, I urge that you apprehend this fiend. Should this spirit roam free, nothing could more besmirch Acala’s grace. *Trat ham mam, vis visvah svaha!*”

Yoshida’s mantra resounded clearly around them, then the shrill whinny of a horse echoed through the air. The rabid spirit fought frantically against its constraints, frothing at the mouth. The longer its hooves scraped against the gravel, the more sluggish its movements became. Misato found himself breathless; he’d never seen Yoshida perform a Shugendo exorcism ritual up close before.

The horse spirit was responsible for a plague in the area—a high fever with initially no apparent cause. Yoshida had bound the spirit to the earth using Buddhist energy and was beginning to imprison it inside a bamboo tube. A few people from the office in addition to Misato were present, should Yoshida need any help, but in the end there was nothing for them to do.

After Yoshida finished the sealing ritual, he turned back to the others. The instant Yoshida’s eyes met his, Misato felt an uncomfortable movement inside his midriff. He looked down at his stomach in confusion.

Is it...scared of Yoshida?

Misato began to panic; if that was the case, his working life would become a living nightmare. In the midst of his fluster he didn’t catch sight of what his inhabitant had *actually* reacted to.

As Yoshida walked back to the group, everyone started congratulating his work, one by one. He glanced over at Misato, then suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, all the color draining from his face.

“Miyazawa!” Yoshida shouted in alarm.

Misato heard a snort right behind him. The ground vibrated with the clip-clop of hooves. He didn’t even have time to look.

There was another one?!

His shock overtook all his other brain functions.

Then something even worse happened.

“Move!” Yoshida barked, his voice cutting through the clamor. The sound sent a shooting pain through Misato. Its impact was so heavy that it felt as though his insides had been punched directly.

The *thing* inside him struggled, protesting with a silent scream. Misato doubled over, clutching one hand to his mouth.

"Hey, Miyazawa?!" Yoshida yelled, startled as he rushed over to Misato. All he'd done was try to exorcise the wild horse.

But *it* had recognized Yoshida as an enemy and writhed inside Misato's gut, baring its fangs at its assailant. Misato desperately tried to placate it, somehow scraping together the composure to stand upright again.

The others were doing their best to cope with the second horse spirit. Misato refused to let himself be a liability to the team. With all his might, he forced it back as it surged to escape and attack Yoshida. He grimly endured the terrible, resultant nausea and, attempting an air of self-assurance, said, "I'm okay...and I'm sorry." He inclined his head and coerced his facial muscles into a calm smile. "I was just a little surprised. Thank you for saving me."

Yoshida returned Misato's excuse with a sullen look. It seemed like he wanted to say something but was unsure whether he should, and before he could open his mouth, a colleague called out to him. The rest of the group had succeeded in subduing the spirit and wanted Yoshida's help sealing it. Hesitantly, he looked back at Misato.

"So long as you're sure you're okay," he replied uncertainly. "But if you're not feeling well, tell someone as soon as possible."

"I will. Thank you, sir," Misato said firmly, bowing low as Yoshida walked away. He could hide his face that way.

"DO you fear how others see you?"

Suddenly, memories of the piano spirit's kind, serious tone came flooding back to him.

Ten years before, the question had rendered him speechless. He couldn't even manage a nod or shake of his head.

"Given your strong spiritual perception, I understand that seeing creatures such as myself might not be unusual for you. However...if you shed all caution around spirits, you may eventually find yourself in deep water," the spirit said, patting the top of Misato's head with a ghostly hand. It was only then that Misato noticed he'd been staring at his feet.

"If you suppress your feelings and keep everything bottled up, the darkness will come for you sooner or later. The most sensitive children are at the highest risk, you know. It's not good to grow comfortable around us," the piano admonished. "Do you dislike the world of the living?"

Misato couldn't deny it. Nor could he find it in him back then to lie just to save face.

"You should let yourself be more emotional every once in a while. There's no need to be scared of letting other people know how you truly feel," the piano said earnestly. "Remember: you're alive. It's natural for you to feel certain ways because emotions are a part of being human."

The piano spirit's beautiful voice boomed in heartfelt reproof. Misato had never expected to receive such rich advice, but—he'd needed to hear those words so badly that he was crying before he knew it. He watched in bemusement as teardrops plopped down onto his knuckles.

"If you carry on repressing how you truly feel, then one day you shall forget how to feel at all. Music is emotion. As a musical being, I cannot stand to see the music inside you die out," the spirit lamented. "Crying in front of the mirror is meaningless. When you're in pain, you must cry in front of others. Cry your heart out."

In front of real, living people—not me. That was what he meant.

RYOUI had invited Misato out for dinner at the bar he worked at. He figured it would be the fastest, most convenient way to thank Misato for doing work around the estate. It had been an impulsive offer that occurred to him on the spot, but Misato cordially accepted all the same.

That pretty boy's way too hard-working.

When he suggested that Misato could help maintain the estate instead of paying rent, his tenant had apparently taken that proposition very seriously. But Ryouji wasn't stupid. He knew how much it cost to outsource such well-made talismans by normal means. Simply put, Ryouji had a guilty conscience. He didn't really want to make the guy work for peanuts.

Ordinarily, he didn't think very highly of people who went to

bars and didn't order alcohol, but he didn't intend on making the man drive home drunk, and their house wasn't close enough to financially justify taking a taxi or hitching a lift. So he would treat Misato to some oolong tea instead. He'd also saved Misato a seat in front of the large metal *teppan* where he stood cooking most nights.

Initially Ryouji had told Misato to drop by whenever he felt like it, but he never showed up, not even once. That was why Ryouji had decided that morning to make explicit plans with Misato. He'd told his manager that a friend would be coming later that day, but...

"I didn't realize you had any friends!"

His manager had erupted into laughter as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

Dude's got a terrible sense of humor. It wasn't even funny, jerk.

His work uniform consisted of a black bandana embroidered with the bar's name and a matching black apron. And Ryouji kept his sunglasses on, even at work.

When he glanced up at the wall clock, he saw that it was almost six o'clock. Misato would be arriving soon.

"Sup, Ryou? You're sure keepin' an eagle eye on that clock today..." pointed out a regular sitting diagonally across from him at the bar. Evidently Ryouji was acting restless. He'd even labeled the seat with a "reserved" card.

"Oh," he said awkwardly. "I'm just waitin' for the person who reserved this seat to show up."

"Ahh, right," the customer casually replied, immediately losing interest and turning to talk to another regular sitting beside him. They were chatting about a large stray dog that had been sighted in the next town over. Well—it was a stretch to call it a "town." Due to Heisei-era municipal mergers, ninety percent of the "towns" in the area were made up of mountains. Hence the dog they were gossiping about would probably have to cross one or two before Tomoe was in any danger. Nevertheless, Ryouji silently filed the information away in a corner of his memory, just in case.

The bar was a street away from the town hall and in the middle of a row of several other bars. The small, mismatched buildings lined the sidewalk, only two or three stories high at most. Ryouji's place of employment was similarly dinky: it was a cramped room with just a few tables in addition to the seats at the bar. It wasn't particularly trendy, so groups of young people or women

rarely visited. Nor was the place at all geared toward newcomers. Usually, the only people there were regulars who worked nearby and needed a place to destress.

At the very back of the room, at the end of the bar, Ryouji manned the teppan—a large, hot metal plate built into the bar, used to grill and fry food. Though at the moment, his attention was more focused on the clock above him. Just as he began to worry, the bell hanging over the front door jingled.

“Hey, welcome!” his manager called out.

Ryouji placed down the spatula he’d been using to flip some diced steak, then covered the meat with a lid to make sure it cooked all the way through. When he looked up, he saw Misato standing in the narrow aisle. All the regulars had noticed Misato, too, who shrunk in on himself under their collective stares.

“Yo, Misato. Take a seat right here,” Ryouji said, smiling as he pointed to the “reserved” card directly in front of him. Misato appeared smaller in stature than usual, clutching his bag to his chest as he nervously walked over.

“You’ve been workin’ really hard recently, haven’tcha? I guess you finished off your work for today before comin’ here.”

Town Hall employees seemed to rack up a bewildering amount of overtime. Well, the workload probably varied between departments, but recently, he’d noticed that Misato never came home on time unless it was a “no overtime” day.

“To be honest...it’s more like I couldn’t take it anymore today, so I just left it for tomorrow,” Misato admitted quietly, dropping his head a little.

Ryouji was surprised. It wasn’t like Misato was always a super cheerful kind of guy, but for some reason he seemed to be really down in the dumps. “Aw, man. Well, you did your best, aight? I know how much it sucks when you have to cook after a lousy day at work, so it’s a good thing you’re here. Pick anythin’ you want off the menu. Don’t worry about money—I’ll treat ya,” Ryouji said, nudging the cup of oolong tea in front of him.

“Oh. Thank you,” Misato replied vacantly. His eyes seemed to glaze over as he skimmed the menu, a tired look on his face. “Then...I’ll have a bowl of edamame, some pickles, and...some tofu, please.”

Despite Ryouji’s insistence that he ignore cost, he’d only ordered cheap appetizers. “C’mon, man. Don’t you want any meat?”

Ryouji eyed him doubtfully.

"No, thanks. I don't feel great today, to be honest. I feel like I'll be sick if I eat anything substantial." Misato winced, his shoulders drooping glumly. Ryouji didn't want to be unkind, but Misato looked terrible, as if both his mind and body were on the brink of complete shutdown.

"All right. I wouldn't wanna force you, then. Although..." He paused, thinking. "If it's just 'cause you're tired, how 'bout you have a drink or two? I get off at ten tonight, so if you can wait that long, I'm happy to give you a lift home," he offered casually.

If the cause of Misato's exhaustion was mental, then a bit of alcohol might help him forget his woes. Ryouji would have to drive him back downtown the following morning, but that wasn't a big deal; they lived in the same house, after all. Misato, on the other hand, blinked up at him as if he'd just said something utterly incomprehensible.

"I couldn't possibly make you go to that much trouble for me," Misato protested, valiantly straightening in his seat in an effort to maintain his sense of dignity.

The two seemed to have very disparate views of the world. Ryouji couldn't imagine how different Misato's upbringing must have been compared to his own. He'd parted ways with his adoptive father when he was a young teenager and had no other relatives to speak of. Since then, he'd gone through life hopping from one mutually advantageous relationship to another, friends constantly coming and going.

He indulged others when the situation called for it and at times bent over backward for people he wasn't very close to. And rather than asking for anything in return, he could allow himself to be cruel to them. That was the strange, closed-off sort of world he came from: a community of self-employed mediums in a dark corner of Tokyo where everyone engaged in those kinds of pseudo-intimate relationships.

Misato Miyazawa, however, had clearly grown up in a relatively stable environment. He gave off the air of having been taught independence and self-responsibility from a young age. Everything he said and did was imbued with a sense of sincerity and politeness, although, in Ryouji's opinion, he was using that formality to keep everyone at arm's length.

"I know you're only sayin' that to be polite." Ryouji grinned.

"Anyway, want a chicken leg? This ain't a temple. You don't need to follow a vegetarian diet." He took the cooked diced steak from the teppan and transferred it to a plate. After passing it to the customer who'd ordered it, he started grilling a salty drumstick. Misato hadn't actually said yes, so he'd taken the decision upon himself.

Eventually, Misato finally nodded, smiling with a hint of apprehension as he said, "Thank you."

The sound of sizzling fat filled the silence between them as it cooked. Misato patiently watched Ryouji work.

"Hey, Ryouji," he unexpectedly piped up. "How long have you been working here? You're pretty good with a spatula," he said, admiring Ryouji's handiwork.

"Why, thanks," Ryouji chuckled. "I started here last summer, so...almost a year now."

He'd applied for the job partly as a way to escape the house at night; he was sick of the specters' antics, and their ceaseless racket kept him up anyway. In the two months since Misato's arrival, the place had been totally transformed in that respect. He used to do all he could to get the latest shift possible, but the nights he spent at home were peaceful of late. In truth, he earned and saved enough money that he didn't actually need a part-time job at all.

"How about that drink? I'm serious about what I said before. We literally live in the same house, dude—it's no biggie." He shrugged. "I'm tellin' ya, drinkin' some alcohol and complainin' as loud as you want is the best remedy for when you're stressed. Get wasted, barf your guts out, and pass the hell out, I don't care. I'll still take you home." He knew he was being overbearing for no good reason but wanted to persuade the guy regardless.

"...Do I really look that terrible?" Misato asked with a weak smile.

"No offense, but that face you're making right now? Yeah. People come here to drink because of all kinds of crap, but I only see that face when something's *seriously* wrong." He sighed. "Oh, but if you're gonna talk trash about work, be careful to keep your voice down, aight? Some of our regulars work at Town Hall, too. If you start bad-mouthin' a guy, and it turns out he's right behind you, barf will be the least of your worries," he joked.

For a moment, Misato gazed at the bar top, unconvinced. When he looked back up at Ryouji again, his handsome face lit up

with a half-hearted smile. He shook his head gently. "No, I'm fine. Seriously, I'm okay with tea. Besides, even if I do drink, I don't really get drunk."

Ryouji certainly wasn't expecting that. "Whoa, really?" he remarked with a lopsided smirk. Anyone would be taken aback to hear a skinny, weak-looking guy with a pretty face like Misato say he could handle his drink well. "You sure seem confident, huh?" Ryouji quipped, trying to stir him up.

"You could say that," Misato replied, grinning in return.

Ryouji barked a laugh; dude really was confident. "You're on. When you're feelin' up to it, let's see who can last the longest." He raised a raised eyebrow, flipping the meat on the teppan with an efficient flick of his wrist.

Misato smiled again. "All right."

Chapter 4: Lost and Found

MISATO slammed his laptop shut and picked up his bag as he left his desk.

The clock read around half past six. According to the weather forecast, the rainy season wouldn't let up for another week or so, but the sky had cleared over the course of the afternoon. All the clouds were gone.

It was the seventh month of the lunisolar calendar, with the Obon Festival fast approaching. Obon was a Buddhist custom of honoring the spirits of one's ancestors, which meant that work was gradually getting busier and busier for Misato. That day, however, appeared to be the eye of the storm, because everyone managed to finish their tasks earlier than usual. A lot of people had already left the office, and the remaining few were more focused on idle chitchat than work.

The day's topic of interest was bears, evidently. There had been reports of a carnivorous bear wandering the mountains near the town just north of Tomoe. In the past few months, the number of half-eaten animal corpses found in that area had increased drastically.

Normally bears were omnivores and preferred to scavenge for animals that were already dead rather than hunt for themselves. But the bear of rumor was different. Witnesses claimed to have seen it kill live badgers. There was a lot of worried discussion regarding the question of whether it might eventually attack a human.

"See yeh tomorrow, Miyazawa. Great work today," Tsujimoto called from his neighboring desk, noticing that Misato was on his way out.

"You too, Tsujimoto," he said politely in return with a bow of his head. Then he left the room, softly closing the door behind him.

Now...what should I do about dinner?

He made his way down the dimly lit staircase, contemplating what ingredients he might have in the fridge at home. The moment he stepped outside, though, the aroma of cooking meat wafted

toward him from a nearby restaurant. Saliva washed over his tongue. Before he knew it, he was heading in the direction of Ryouji's bar.

"Wait, no." He stopped himself, shaking his head vehemently. "I shouldn't. I'm not that desperate right now..."

In the time since he'd been invited (effectively forced) to dinner the previous month, Misato had dropped by Ryouji's bar a few more times to perch in front of the teppan and chat. The temptation to just sit down and be served food, without having to clean up after himself, was too strong to resist when his brain was fried. Misato had also learned that contrary to Ryouji's appearance, he was good-natured and always happy to help. And although he was friendly, he didn't actually get too personal: he never pried into other people's business. Misato had come to really enjoy talking to Ryouji while digging into a good meal. It cheered him up.

However, as with all pleasures in life, it came with a price.

He reached into his bag and rummaged for his wallet. Bracing himself for the worst, he peeked inside.

It was the beginning of the month, so he was supposed to have enough money to last for a while. Instead, the state of his wallet was utterly dismal. After using up his pitiful bonus on food and drink, he'd also had to buy fuel for his car, hence his bank balance was about to hit rock bottom. He couldn't afford to eat out. At all.

The other day, he went to eat at the bar, completely forgetting about his lack of funds. He'd ended up owing Ryouji money.

Ryouji Karino was exceptionally good at making others feel comfortable around him. Until then, Misato had never borrowed money from a friend before. Ever. He was the type of person who thought it was normal for each person to pay their share of the bill down to the exact yen. He owed someone money for the first time in his life. For food, of all things.

He did say I could pay him back along with next month's rent...

Misato considered going to the bar anyway and trusting his future self to foot the bill. "Hmmm..." He scowled, thinking long and hard. "Maybe that's not such a good idea..."

His resolve faltering for a moment, he turned on his heel toward the bar. But then harsh reality caught up to him, and he ultimately decided to walk to the parking lot as originally planned.

"I haven't even paid this month's rent yet," he whispered up to the heavens, hoping it might reach a relevant god.

His quiet prayer dissipated into the darkening sky.

***THERE** is luck in what others leave behind.*

Ryouji had heard the saying a few times before. He'd always taken it to mean that one could make the best out of something foisted upon them or that coming last wasn't necessarily the worst outcome. It wasn't an excuse to be greedy and hoard anything and everything that went unclaimed just because one could.

He didn't think that bargain hunting was a bad thing, per se, but that people should at least give some thought to whether they really needed the stuff. And if it turned out they didn't, the absolute *worst* thing they could do was make it someone else's problem.

Such thoughts weighed on his mind as he glowered at the unwanted object in front of him. It'd been palmed off onto him at work that day.

"Why the hell did he think this thing'd make any money, anyway...?" he grumbled.

He was sitting in the living room of the grand old house, the room that doubled as his bedroom. It was a mess. He sat cross-legged on his futon, surrounded by piles of manga, trash strewn about the floor. The offending item on the coffee table returned his glare.

It was a huge, sparkling, golden lucky cat. Its golden coating was very obviously cheap and plasticky, and its expression brimmed with spite. Both paws were raised in the air, greedily beckoning both customers and "good" fortune.

"That's part of why it's such a horrible thing. It takes advantage of people's desires."

Sitting next to Ryouji on the futon was Misato Miyazawa, a penniless civil servant with a pretty face. He was picking at the late-night meal Ryouji had brought home from work for him, casually staring at the evil lucky cat as he ate. Despite its palpable malice, he didn't seem to fear it in the least; he had an impressively high tolerance for dark beings that hailed from the Other Side.

Then again, he was the guy who kept a yokai zoo in his front yard. Still, judging by the glimpses that Ryouji caught of the courtyard from time to time, Misato's little project appeared to be

going well. It didn't cause any trouble for Ryouji, so who was he to judge?

Three whole months had passed since the incident that led to Misato moving into Ryouji's house. It seemed like he'd adjusted pretty well to life there. Surprisingly, he was more than happy to come out of his room whenever Ryouji asked, so they had started gardening around the estate and going drinking together. There were times when they hung out in each other's rooms, too, like they were doing just then. They hadn't yet come to an agreement on who could hold his liquor best.

"In the end, as soon as he realized this thing spelled trouble, he insisted on making *me* deal with it. For nothin'," Ryouji complained.

He hadn't wanted to take the tacky-looking lucky cat, but the man who'd requested he do so wasn't really someone he could refuse—his manager. And not only had the entire affair interrupted his day, but he also wasn't going to get any money out of it either. He pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and rubbed his eyes, stressed.

"Lucky cats use their right hand to beckon fortune and their left hand to beckon customers, right?" Misato pointed out. "I think it's painted gold because it represents good fortune with money, but...why's it sticking its tongue out?" Curiously, he poked the tip of the cat's nose.

All of a sudden, its eyes began to move.

"EEP!" Misato yelped, his white kimono rustling when he jumped in surprise.

Prior to asking him to come over to the main house, Ryouji had found Misato lying on his futon and playing with his phone. Misato always wore the same style of white kimono rather than t-shirts and sweatpants, and while Ryouji didn't understand why Misato was so fond of that particular type of pajamas, he did get spooked every time he ran into the guy in the corridor at night.

"Oh, right. I forgot to mention its eyes move. That crap was freakin' loud on the drive home."

Ryouji really *was* angry about the wicked thing. It had been abruptly fobbed off to him, right as he was about to head home, no less. Honestly, he'd dragged Misato into his predicament because he couldn't bear to deal with it alone. Nor did he want to go to sleep in a bad mood. When he saw the light still on in the outbuilding,

Ryouji had been glad for the opportunity to turn to Misato for some advice. Misato was unexpectedly willing to talk whenever Ryouji showed up at his door out of the blue.

When Ryouji had gotten off work at the bar, his manager had forcibly thrust the sinister cat into the back seat of his car. The mechanisms had clattered and rattled constantly the entire way home. Supposedly, a friend of the manager had recently gone bankrupt, and the lucky cat was among the items he gave the manager as collateral for a loan.

Ryouji propped one elbow up on the table and rested his chin on his palm. With the other hand, he rummaged in his pocket for a cigarette and lazily nudged it between his lips.

“The manager was able to get some money out of the other junk but apparently couldn’t get rid of this thing, no matter how hard he tried.” Ryouji sighed.

In other words, the lucky cat was possessed. It was possible that the manager’s friend had actually gone bankrupt as a direct result of owning the thing.

“That’s why I’m so freakin’ mad. Who does he think he is, tryna pass dangerous junk off onto me as a ‘present’? That baldy,” Ryouji growled.

The money Ryouji earned working at the bar was additional income; his primary job was as a freelance exorcist. Basically, the bar manager sought to get rid of a very clearly malicious object but hadn’t wanted to foot the costs of employing an exorcist. So he inflicted it on Ryouji instead.

Talk about taking advantage of his position.

Ryouji couldn’t exactly say no, given the fact that his manager kindly turned a blind eye to him conducting business dealings in the bar. Most of Ryouji’s new clients found out about his services via word of mouth from satisfied past customers, and many of them came to the bar to request his help.

“Still, I guess it’s no wonder this thing took a likin’ to that guy. Stingy jerk,” he spat, blowing cigarette smoke into the air. Misato made a show of wrinkling his nose up in distaste and waving his hands around to dispel the smoke.

“Even if I can’t make him take it back, I don’t wanna go to the trouble of sealin’ it or exorcisin’ it for *nothin’* in return.”

The tools and implements he used in rituals weren’t free; he had to pay for them somehow. Even if he subdued the spirit, it

would be a waste of effort.

“Then what’re you going to do? You can’t just put something like this out on garbage day, you know,” Misato said as he calmly inspected the cat, shooting Ryouji a raised eyebrow. He was plainly having a lot of fun exploring all of the cat’s strange movements.

“Mmm...” Ryouji hummed low in thought, scowling up at the ceiling. “Guess I’ll sell it off. Ain’t my problem,” he said with a shrug.

There *were* eccentric people out there who were interested in cursed objects. Plus, those with ulterior motives might be more interested in its...*practical* uses, so to speak. If he advertised it to the underground market, he could possibly make a tiny profit off it—or at least enough to be worth the trouble.

“Oh, yikes... Now even *you’re* trying to gain something from it!” Misato grouched next to him.

Ryouji shot him a sharp glare. “Can it. More importantly, where the hell’s your rent payment, huh? If you keep fallin’ behind, you might have to start payin’ me back with your body,” Ryouji threatened, rolling the cigarette filter between his teeth.

At some point they’d started to speak to each other much more familiarly, he realized.

A flash of inspiration struck him then. If worse came to worst, he could have Misato take care of the cat.

Ryouji usually charged Misato the small sum of thirty thousand yen per month for rent, including utilities. However, after accounting for moving expenses, student loan payments, and the costs associated with his car...Misato’s salary evidently hadn’t cut it that month. After just three months, he was already behind.

No one was under the impression that a job at a town hall in the countryside paid well, but Ryouji was admittedly a little dismayed that Misato’s salary didn’t even cover basic living costs. If Misato had moved into the apartment he originally signed a contract for, Ryouji truly doubted that he would’ve been able to afford living there for long.

All right. Let’s go with that.

Pleased with his Plan B, Ryouji got to his feet and ushered Misato out of the room. Misato protested in confusion but eventually returned to the outbuilding. Ryouji flumped back onto his futon, took off his sunglasses—which he wore even at home—and booted up his laptop. He soon got to work, scouring the

internet for prospective buyers.

Fortunately for Misato, Ryouji found someone offering a reasonable amount of money. He settled the transaction and was in good spirits for the rest of the month.

IT was the end of July.

Ryouji held his right hand out, palm up. Misato knelt before him, shoulders drooping in shame.

“Cough up.”

He hadn’t been able to scrounge up the funds to pay his July rent on time and owed Ryouji two months’ worth for both July and August. Misato’s fourth monthly payday was that day, and he was under strict instruction to withdraw the money from his account as soon as the bank received it.

Ryouji wasn’t particularly short on cash, but if he kept allowing late payments, it could become a habit for Misato. He would never kick Misato out, of course, but if the guy couldn’t manage the current amount, then Ryouji would have to make him work instead.

Just like the evening earlier in the month, that night saw Ryouji arrive home as Misato was about to go to bed. This time, though, Ryouji barged into Misato’s room uninvited and plopped himself down next to the pillow on the futon.

“I trust you went to the bank like I told ya, didn’t you? Hand it over,” he pressed.

Reluctantly, Misato reached into his bag and slowly drew out an envelope. Ryouji recognized it as the sort one commonly found in stacks at ATMs.

“Here. That’s sixty thousand yen, two months’ rent. I’m so sorry it’s late...” Misato said nervously, carefully proffering the envelope with both hands as if it were an extremely precious artifact.

Ryouji snatched it from his fingers and quickly flicked through the contents. Sure enough, there were six ten-thousand-yen bills inside. “Aight. I’ll get off your case now. You should be grateful I don’t charge any late fees,” he said, smirking.

“Um, I...I forgot to check how much I owe you from the

bar...” Misato murmured, casting his eyes to the side awkwardly.

In truth, Ryouji had forgotten. But as Misato said it, he remembered the time Misato visited the bar only to pull out an empty wallet.

“Oh, that. You can just pay it back bit by bit,” Ryouji said with a firm nod as he stood up.

“Thank you,” Misato replied gratefully, bowing his head for a few moments. When he looked up at Ryouji again, his eyes were glistening with anxiety.

“Listen, Ryouji...” he began, his eyebrows turning upward worriedly. “I really struggled to scrape enough money together for the rent, so...if something, uh...*happens* in the middle of the night, I’m really sorry.”

Ryouji raised a confused eyebrow at the nonsensical apology. As he did, his sunglasses fell down his nose a little. Over the top of them he caught a glimpse of *something* wrapped around Misato’s neck. Ryouji had long known there was some sort of creature hidden inside Misato’s body—something his tengu eyes couldn’t quite make out. He’d happened to see it the very first time they met, in the park.

“...As long as no one gets hurt, you can do what you want.”

The matter clearly wasn’t as simple as Misato being possessed by it, whatever it was. For example, whenever Ryouji saw people possessed by fox spirits, he could tell as soon as he took his sunglasses off. The creature was either quite skilled at hiding its presence or had possessed Misato in a very specific way.

Misato nodded in reply. He gazed after Ryouji forlornly, who had turned to face the wooden door that opened into the passageway to the main house. It looked like there was something else he wanted to say.

“By the way...” Misato said, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. “I feel like I can sense that lucky cat spirit again. Why might that be?” He smiled anxiously, turning his head to one side slightly.

“...Don’t ask.”

With that, Ryouji left the building.

RYOUI woke up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom.

His body was heavy from sleep, and he dragged his feet as he trudged out of the living room. The downside of having a huge house was that midnight visits to the toilet were somewhat of an ordeal. He had to walk down a long, dark corridor to reach the back of the building, where the rooms with running water were located. Still, he was lucky that the passageways that ran outside were covered with proper roofing, especially given the age of the old farmhouse.

He padded down the hall, the way lit by two or three naked lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling. At that time of night, the frogs were finally quiet, so the slight creaks of the cool, wooden flooring penetrated the crisp silence with his every step.

THUNK.

Suddenly he heard something move on the other side of a door as he passed by. The door led to a storage room that neither of them really used.

“Tch,” Ryouji tutted loudly. In spite of the creepy atmosphere, he wasn’t so inexperienced as to be scared by something so trivial. Not to mention, he already knew what had made the noise. He’d shut it in there himself before he went to bed.

Shaking himself, he continued on his journey to the bathroom and did his business in peace. On the way back to the living room he stopped in front of the storage room.

“Screw this. I was an idiot for thinkin’ it’d be that easy,” he fumed.

He dug his fingers into the sliding door’s divots and violently threw it open. Stiff with disuse, it rattled unhealthily in its track.

Within the darkness of the room he saw the lucky cat that he’d acquired a month past lying motionless on the floor. It was glowing a dim white color, and although the cat’s eyes still overflowed with malevolence, its mouth had changed since their first encounter. Before, it had rudely been sticking its tongue out. That night, it held a “flourishing business” charm in its mouth; it almost looked like a different cat altogether.

But Ryouji knew. It was definitely the same golden lucky cat that he thought he’d gotten rid of a few weeks prior.

Earlier that afternoon, he’d seen it standing in the bar’s front window.

To say Ryouji frowned when he laid eyes on it would have been an understatement. He had no idea how the hell it had made

its way back but did conclude that his manager was apparently fond of lucky cats. It had been painted white instead of gold, and its cheeky tongue had been replaced by a charm. Ryouji could immediately tell it was the same cat as before, yet his manager hadn't noticed whatsoever.

Maybe he has enemies. It's possible someone gave it to him on purpose but...I dunno, it feels more like it just missed the guy or something. It probably came back on its own.

Ryouji eyed the object suspiciously as it shook noisily on the floor, fighting against the haphazardly placed sealing talisman he'd slapped on it earlier. He'd rushed to bring the cat home out of fear that something bad would happen to the bar if he just left it there. It was proving to be incredibly difficult to get rid of, however, so he'd just shut it in the room while he figured out what to do next.

Even his manager likely wouldn't be happy about the fact that the lucky cat—which was neither lucky nor cute—had taken a shine to him. Worse, it probably caused him financial *misfortune* and *bad* luck. In most cases, a lucky cat taking a liking to someone was favorable, but the baleful cat in front of him just liked taking advantage of people.

Ryouji sighed. He ran a hand through his bed-mussed hair, then turned on his heel. There were times he was grateful for the house's size. No matter how much of a racket the thing kicked up, the noise wouldn't travel as far as his room. He would at least get a good night's sleep.

Guess I'll figure out what to do with it tomorrow.

Just as he closed the storage room door, the floorboards at the very end of the corridor creaked loudly with the weight of something heavy.

The lightbulbs began to flicker slightly.

A cold, icy sensation washed over Ryouji's feet, as though he were standing in a swift current. He froze on the spot.

From the back of the house, the creaking continued. The end of the passageway connected to the outbuilding where Misato slept. The sound echoed out of the darkness, where the glow of the dim lightbulbs didn't quite reach. Little by little, floorboard by floorboard...it was coming closer.

The lights blinked out, and Ryouji's vision was shrouded in black. The lucky cat's tantrum went silent—as if it were attempting to hide.

“Om Marichiyeh Svaha,” Ryouji whispered quietly, performing a mudra with his fingers. The incantation would help conceal his presence from the creature.

Carefully, he inched back into the storage room, trying not to make a sound as he hid behind the door.

Wait...could it be Misato's pet...?

He could sense something terrible. It felt much larger than anything that could fit inside a human body; Ryouji couldn't physically see whatever it was, but the pressure in the air was tangible. He swallowed. Hard.

He'd always known that Misato was keeping something under wraps but never imagined it would be so big. Ryouji had told Misato he could do whatever he liked so long as no one got hurt, but...was it really safe to have around?

The creaks of the floorboards edged closer. It was right outside the door. Then it slithered through the gap and slinked into the room.

What is that? An albino rat snake?

The huge snake spirit's scales gleamed with a pale, pearly luminescence. All Ryouji could do was stare in mute amazement. It was about as thick as a human thigh in diameter.

The pure white snake's split tongue flitted in and out as it searched the room. It slipped past Ryouji. Evidently, he wasn't what it was looking for; the presence-masking incantation only worked properly if the other party wasn't specifically seeking the reciter out.

So what is it looking for?

Then he saw it heading for the lucky cat on the floor. There wasn't even time for him to process what was happening before the serpent opened its huge jaws and instantaneously lunged at the object.

Ryouji gulped again.

The snake nimbly sank its teeth into the lucky cat, and within seconds, the smaller spirit had vanished into its mouth. The base of the snake's head swelled unnaturally as the cat passed through its throat, until the lump gradually began to slide down its neck and toward its lower body.

The snake remained stationary for a while, letting the lucky cat properly settle in its stomach—if it had a stomach. Then it sluggishly turned back to the door and wound out of the room.

Luckily, it showed no interest in Ryouji whatsoever.

What just happened?

Eventually, he felt the snake's presence fade as it made its way out of the building. With a sigh of relief, Ryouji lifted the stealth charm and stepped out of the storage room.

"...What the *hell* was that?!" he exclaimed in bemusement.

The corridor had fallen completely silent. There wasn't a single trace of the snake or lucky cat left behind.

RYOJI slept in the next morning, exhausted from lack of sleep. In the midst of his fatigue, he heard a knock at the door.

"G-Good morning, Ryouji..."

When he lifted his head and rubbed his eyes, he saw Misato peeking through the half-open, paper sliding door. Misato stuck his head into the room, the top half of his kimono loose around his chest.

"Yo..." replied Ryouji blearily. He couldn't be bothered to reach for his sunglasses, so he simply sat up on his futon, crossing his legs. He could see *it* slithering along Misato's exposed collar bone.

"Um," Misato began, unsure. "Last night, did you...?" He trailed off, a sheen of sweat obvious on his skin.

Ryouji sighed. "Yeah. I saw it," he yawned. "Listen—I'll give you a month's free rent. I don't know what you skimmed on to make sure you paid me back, but can you tell that thing not to eat such weird crap in future? That *definitely* can't be healthy."

"Y-Yes, I will. Thank you very much," Misato replied stiffly, beginning to make his retreat.

"Oh, by the way..." Ryouji paused thoughtfully. "Where exactly were you from again?"

Misato stopped dead in his tracks. Ryouji could recall Misato had said he was from Shimane Prefecture, but nothing more specific than that.

"...Izumo," Misato answered hesitantly after a long silence.

"Gotcha," Ryouji said with a curious nod. "There's a big spiritual family in Izumo, ain't there? The Narukamis, right?"

The Narukami family had been around since the age of gods in

ancient Japan. They were an extremely old lineage of Shintoist mediums. They practiced Onmyodo and claimed that a dragon god was their progenitor. Among exorcists and psychics, their family was one of the biggest names in Japan. They were so famous that even a thuggish exorcist from the run-down streets of Tokyo like Ryouji knew of them.

“Indeed,” Misato said, averting his eyes.

That was enough information for Ryouji to put the hypothesis that had taken him all night to come up with to the test. “Are the Miyazawas one of the branch families or something? Unless...” he insinuated, narrowing his eyes.

Misato had a look of resignation on his face as he popped out from behind the door and knelt down in front of the threshold.

“Miyazawa is my mother’s surname. My father’s side of the family are all Narukamis. My mother...was his mistress,” he explained.

“Knew it. I don’t know why I didn’t realize as soon as you said you were from a mountain clan that practiced Onmyodo,” Ryouji chuckled. “So, you must be your dad’s eldest son, right? The rumors say you died or went missing, y’know.”

Ryouji calmly folded his arms and nodded in contemplation, but Misato was frozen stiff. He was kneeling so rigidly that it genuinely looked like he was waiting to be decapitated.

Giving an exasperated sigh, Ryouji said, “Hey—I ain’t gonna kick you out for somethin’ like that. Although, if you get behind on your rent again, I *might* consider it.”

Ryouji had first heard about the missing illegitimate son of the Narukami family a few years prior, back when he was still living in Tokyo. The guy was quite the celebrity. Once he thought about it, there had been multiple hints that Ryouji probably should’ve picked up on but went straight over his head because of what Misato was *really* like.

The Misato Miyazawa that Ryouji knew was harmless; he was a bit of an airhead, with a touch of helpless uncertainty inherent in his smile. Whereas when Ryouji had originally heard the rumors about the first-born son of the Narukamis, he imagined someone totally different. The man in front of him most definitely did not match the picture in his head.

“I’m sorry...” Misato apologized dispiritedly, shrinking smaller and smaller.

Ryouji yawned and ran a hand through his bed head. Then he waved both of his hands toward Misato irritably, almost as if he were shooing a dog or cat away.

“What’re you apologizin’ for? I never asked, so you had no reason to tell me. Anyways—shouldn’t you be gettin’ ready for work? You’ll be late,” he said, pointing at Misato’s loose kimono.

Misato stood up uncertainly and hesitantly excused himself, shutting the door behind him. In shadow once more, the room turned dark, and Ryouji flopped back down to snuggle under his duvet. The sun wasn’t that bright yet, but the birds were chirping a little too merrily for him to comfortably go back to sleep.

He realized then just how much he’d taken on when he picked Misato up off the streets. Nevertheless, he could at least appreciate the fact that the evil lucky cat had met its end without any effort on his part. He’d always known *something* was lurking inside Misato and always hoped that it might function as a sort of spirit insect repellent.

“Still, I can’t believe the guy’s the Narukami Snake Eater...” He shook his head. “Never judge a book by its cover, I guess. But as long as no one gets hurt, I don’t really care how many snakes or spiders he eats,” he mumbled, letting his green and silver tengu eyes fall shut.

Chapter 5: Yearning

ALTHOUGH he knew it had been an irrational decision, Misato could say with confidence that he'd made it himself.

Would the serpent consume him and end his life? Or would he consume the serpent?

And even if he prevailed, would he be able to live a normal life?

He did not regret choosing to live.

He did wish things had been different.

"If only you weren't here...I'd probably have a happier life," he muttered, peeling the talisman off his back one morning. His fingertips brushed across the patch of hard, pale keratin on his shoulder blade. He gently stroked the snake scales, which were warm with his body heat. He recognized that decision had been unavoidable, yet he couldn't help but lament it.

That utterance of wishful thinking might just have been the beginning of the curse.

"OUCH, that burns!"

There was a resounding *snap*, and the young man in front of her suddenly leapt backward. The air conditioning whirled his papers away as he dropped them. No matter how hot the sun blazed outside, they had to keep the archive room at a constant temperature, which meant the vents constantly blasted out cold air.

The man fell to one knee on the floor of the small, cramped archive room.

"Hey! Are you okay?!" Kana Fujii asked in panic, bending over to look at him. He was clutching his bare forearm where it emerged from a short-sleeved polo shirt.

"I'm fine," he grunted, plainly attempting to stave off his pain. He quite obviously wasn't fine at all, but Kana hadn't the slightest idea of what could have happened to him.

She knelt down, her stocking-covered knees resting on the floor. She helped collect the scattered documents he'd been holding, then peered at him in concern. Judging by the noise she'd heard when it happened, she could only assume he'd been zapped by static electricity; there was nothing hard or sharp between the papers she picked up. In bewilderment, she glanced up again to see the man with long hair gritting his teeth in pain. His name was Miyazawa, and she'd only just met him.

"I really am fine. Sorry about that." He smiled sheepishly. "Something startled me is all."

He was in his early twenties, with a calm face with delicate features. He was from Town Hall and had been sent there—to the Tomoe Museum of History and Folklore—to help out. Kana was the curator for new arrivals and was in the middle of sorting out some materials that had recently been donated.

There was evidence of civilization in Tomoe going back thousands of years to the Jomon period, and the area was home to a multitude of ancient burial mounds. Several discrete burial sites were found in a gently sloping hill, which had since been nationally recognized as a historic landmark. The museum had been built there in order to maintain the grounds as a park.

"Oh, I'll carry this heavy box. Where should I put it? On the shelf over there?" Miyazawa asked casually as if nothing had happened, returning to work immediately. Kana nodded after a moment's hesitation, then headed over to the same shelf with some lighter boxes in tow.

The boxes were full of research papers about folk magic, the records dating from the Jomon period through to the Edo period. The files had once belonged to someone who'd been passionate about researching psychics, and after their death, their family had donated the papers to the museum.

He's here to help, but...to be honest, I don't know what exactly he's helping with.

So far, Miyazawa had done nothing but carry heavy boxes. Plus, he didn't work in the Cultural Assets Division, but the "Abnormal Disaster Unit." What his job entailed was a total mystery to Kana. When she first saw him, his long hair threw her off: he looked so unlike a civil servant that she ended up asking whether he was the real deal before she could stop herself. That was a bad move.

Her boss seemed to know more about the strange young man, but he'd run off before she could ask him anything.

"You'll figure it out for yourself. I think that's best," he'd said.

Ugh, whatever.

Sighing, she finished gathering up the books and printouts about artifact classification that Miyazawa had dumped on the floor and got to her feet once more.

Yearn (verb)

Definition

1.To pine for someone or something.

2.To feel an intense longing for something, typically after being lost or separated from it.

THE incandescent sun burned overhead as he walked.

A humid wind caressed his cheeks.

Summer grass covered the ground as far as the eye could see. Or was it farmland?

The sunlight bleached the landscape a hazy, pale color, yet the plants shimmered a vivid green amid the warm air.

The asphalt beneath his feet had been devoured by weeds.

He was all alone on a large countryside road, surrounded by overwhelming greenery. There wasn't a single car to be seen. But at the foot of the gently sloping mountain he glimpsed houses wavering under the scorching heat. People clearly lived there.

It was silent. At least, he thought it was—until he realized that the air thrummed with an unending background roar. Countless cicadas sang the praises of summer, invading his ears tirelessly. In the distance, a stream bubbled. The treetops stirred in the breeze, a low rustling noise reverberating across the expanse.

As if to smother his tiny form, a huge tsunami of sound swirled around him. The cacophony amalgamated into white noise, until no singular sound was discernible from another.

It was a white, blank, dazzling world with no one else in sight.

He took an unsteady step forward, the summer sun beating

down from directly above. There was a dark shadow cast at his feet. The white guard rails were choked with green grass. Crape myrtle trees lined the road, their pale pink petals fluttering in the breeze.

The world before him was both monochrome and too vivid, the void of sunlight spreading a feeling of desolation on the wind.

He started to walk, though unaware of where exactly he was heading.

In fact, he couldn't remember where he was at all. The landscape was so familiar, yet at the same time, entirely not. It looked like typical Tomoe scenery. A vague sense of disquiet weighed down on him as he walked, impossible to ignore.

Something's wrong.

He looked around him, hoping to find an answer, but nothing stood out.

The sea of green was so vast that it was difficult to tell where one field ended and another started. People's houses were dotted among them: some large, modern family homes; others old, their thatched roofs overlaid with sheets of iron. At the very edge of his vision he could also see a few without the metal coverings. Some houses appeared deserted, with crumbling walls, and others looked like someone might step out the door any second.

He passed a white car swallowed by weeds. The swathes of verdant grass looked untouched, even by animals.

Then suddenly, he reached an old house. It was so old that there wasn't a single pane of glass in the whole building. He drifted by in astonishment; it was rare to see the remains of such an ancient house in that day and age.

Where was I going again...?

He continued to walk, the harsh rays of the sun searing his skin.

MISATO'S entire body was coated in sweat.

He turned over in bed, attempting to dispel the unpleasant sensation of the warmth trapped in his blankets. More beads of sweat trickled down his temples and his throat.

His head hurt. His body felt heavy. His sense of balance was in utter disarray.

He was sick of the uncomfortably hot futon but felt like he might vomit if he got up. He listened to the frogs croaking outside.

The outbuilding didn't have air conditioning. At least the sliding door facing the courtyard included an insect screen, though. His only salvation was the cool air that blew in from the pond, as well as a cheap electric fan. The lights were off, and Misato clutched the thin sheets around himself.

What's wrong with me...? Summer flu? Heatstroke? Either way, this sucks... I'm so thirsty.

Weakly, he dragged himself to his elbows, reaching for the two-liter bottle of mineral water at his bedside. He unscrewed the cap and tipped the water straight down his throat. The bottle had been about a quarter full, but within seconds he drained it completely. He screwed the cap back on and cast it to the floor. There were five or six more empty bottles scattered around it. He couldn't remember drinking that much but evidently he had.

It's so hot... I hate the heat so much...

He'd lost his appetite earlier in the day, so he collapsed straight onto his futon the moment he got home from work.

He just wanted to pass out, but he couldn't sleep whatsoever. Sweat soaked the inside of his pajamas. He breathed an exhausted sigh and lay back down.

“OH, this is a stone flute. And this is a *sankosho*, a three-pronged vajra pestle. You see this comb here? It can be used as a talisman against evil spirits, so I guess that's why it's with this stuff.”

Kana watched Miyazawa unpack the bizarre objects in the cardboard box in front of them. He efficiently sorted the artifacts into groups as he checked over each one, handling them carefully with white gloves. The task was likely why the museum had requested his help. He seemed to have a lot of specialist knowledge pertaining to magical and religious items, which was handy for going through a box full of them.

“You can leave the classification and packaging to me, Fujii,” he directed briskly. “Meanwhile, do you mind adding each item to the inventory?”

When he pointed, she noticed a black wrist brace on his right

forearm. Wondering in the back of her mind what had happened to him, she quickly opened the artifact database on her laptop.

Isn't that where the files hit his arm yesterday...?

If he had been carrying a heavy, hardcover encyclopedia, she'd understand the brace. She couldn't imagine anyone sustaining a significant injury from a small stack of papers, however, although the intense snapping sound she'd heard was undeniable. He hadn't appeared to be hurt too badly the day before, but perhaps it had worsened after he got home.

"...Hello, Fujii? Are you okay?" Miyazawa asked hesitantly. "Should we take a break?"

Kana jumped, shaking herself. Miyazawa peered at her in concern, paused in the middle of sorting. She realized she must have been staring at his arm.

"Oh, yes... It's almost three." She nodded, glancing at the wall clock. She stood up from her chair in a rush in an effort to detract from the awkward atmosphere between them. Accidentally staining the artifacts with food or drink would be bad so they had to move to a different room for their break.

"Yeah," Miyazawa agreed as he followed her, still sounding nervous.

"What happened to your arm?" She couldn't help but ask. When she was curious about something, it would bother her endlessly if she didn't.

"Oh, uh, this? ...I burned myself, that's all," he lied with an unconvincing smile, rubbing where the brace concealed his arm.

She blinked. "You burned it?"

"Yeah... I accidentally splashed it with hot oil while I was cooking. It's not too bad, but the oil splashed over a large area, so I wasn't sure I'd be able to cover it with a regular bandage. And then I felt like a bigger one might draw too much attention to it, so..."

So he'd covered it with a black wrist brace.

"I guess you're right. Those white bandages can be a bit harsh on the eyes," she conceded, opening the door to the break room.

WHEN he stripped the brace off his arm, the haphazardly wrapped bandage underneath was damp with sweat. There wasn't much he

could do about that. He wasn't accustomed to bandaging his own arm, so the effect was shoddy to say the least. With a sigh, he untied the damp fabric and tossed it into the laundry hamper as humid air hit the exposed wound. He'd treated it with some ointment before wrapping it up.

"Hmm... I wonder, what does it say?" he mused as he looked down at the welts creeping up his right forearm. The dressing room was dim, and he couldn't see very well.

The day prior, a book of incantations had brushed against his arm and left a curse inscribed upon his skin in red letters. The strokes of the characters were so thick that Misato couldn't read them even though he was well versed in curses.

When he first touched the book, he had assumed he'd somehow gotten a particularly bad static shock. But when he woke that morning to find his arm carved with scarlet writing, it became clear that wasn't the case. The curse was probably to blame for his nightmares and disturbed sleep the previous night.

Apart from the welts painfully pulling his skin taut, however, he was otherwise physically healthy. It resembled a burn, so as long as the swelling died down in two or three days, he should have nothing to worry about.

The bathroom was shared, but he had it to himself that night. Ryouji was nowhere to be seen. Misato couldn't be bothered to get in the bath, deciding to take a quick shower instead. It was only around six o'clock, so although the eastern-facing dressing room was dim, the bathroom itself was nice and bright, with light filtering in through the huge bay window.

He threw off his gray work polo and his undershirt. After removing his pants and underwear, he walked through to the bathroom. When he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the washbasin, he did a double take.

"Huh...?"

He looked over his shoulder to see his back reflected in the mirror. It looked totally normal. He wasn't especially bony or muscular. Yet his perfectly average, utterly unremarkable spine suddenly felt like it belonged to a complete stranger.

Who is that?

...was the first thought that came to his mind. But it made no sense. Why would he think that?

He turned to fully face the mirror, twisted left and right, and

peered into the world on the other side of the glass. He saw his own face there, just as he remembered it. Another Misato Miyazawa stared back at him, just like always.

Why does it feel...wrong?

As he held his gaze in the mirror, so did the stranger. They shared the same face, but somehow he knew it wasn't him. It was someone else.

His heart raced, as if to remind him he still existed. He was still there.

He tightened his grip on the edge of the washbasin, using his arms to keep himself upright. Chills ran up his unexceptional spine.

"Maybe a shower'll help..." he mumbled.

Standing around naked wouldn't do anything to get rid of the feeling. In an attempt to shrug off the indescribable sense of unease in the pit of his stomach, he hurriedly stepped back into the bathroom.

THERE was a hole in the middle of his torso. And sticking out of it was a huge, mysterious stone.

Its smooth, cylindrical surface reminded him of some kind of monolith. Halfway along its length a hole had been bored through the stone's surface.

What is this...?

Once again, he was wandering below the glaring midsummer sunlight. The road ahead of him meandered back and forth, without a single intersection or set of traffic lights in sight. The gently sloping mountains encircled distant houses and seas of green grass.

There was nothing to shield him from the sunlight. The bright blue sky observed him from above, devoid even of flying birds. The air around him was just as overwhelmed with noise as ever, producing a fuzzy sort of silence.

Where am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

He couldn't remember. Regardless, he kept walking. He couldn't remember how long he'd been doing that either. It could've been less than ten minutes. It could've been hours. It could've been days.

Like before, his dark shadow stuck fast to his feet, almost

nonexistent due to the position of the sun burning his skin.

It's so hot. I'm thirsty...

Occasionally, a car would overtake him. Other than that, nothing else moved.

I hate it here. I want to go home.

He felt dispirited, lonely. He couldn't put the sheer sadness in his heart into words. He simply walked, sluggishly dragging his feet forward. At some point, his head had drooped toward the ground, and he found himself scowling at the asphalt. When he looked up, he saw a luxuriantly green hill ahead in the midst of another sea of even, untouched grass. It was shaped like an upside-down bowl. As he passed, he noticed a single persimmon tree standing at its summit.

It was as if the weed-covered hill formed some kind of shrine at the side of the curved road.

Wait, I know what that is... An ancient burial mound?

It was a relief to finally see something familiar. For a moment he was convinced he'd be able to find his way home, before he stopped abruptly in his tracks.

Where is home?

He had a feeling it was on the other side of that hill.

What? No, it's not.

For some reason, he was certain about that. He wouldn't find the person he sought over there.

But...which way is it, then?

He still got the sense he was supposed to cross over the hill. He'd completely forgotten why he was out there. He hated it. He hated summer. He wanted to go home.

"I can't go home... He didn't wait for me..."

He didn't know where home was anymore. No—in fact...

"Who even am I?" he asked himself, staring down at his open palms.

Did I always look like this?

He recognized himself. He recognized his hands, his body, and his voice. He recognized his long hair, too; he knew he took great care of it and brushed it gently every morning.

But does this body truly belong to me?

"Misato" silently crumpled to the ground, hitting the searing hot asphalt.

“YOU must blow into the flute.”

As he lay in troubled slumber, something whispered from the other side of the paper door.

He didn't own any musical instruments. Half-awake, he shook his head in reply. Then he remembered the magical artifacts he'd been in charge of at work.

But why...?

He could hazard a pretty good guess. It had something to do with the horrible uneasiness heaving through his chest. Yet, even if he squeezed his eyes shut in concentration, he couldn't pinpoint what was causing the sensation.

He was forgetting something. Whatever it was, he couldn't remember no matter how hard he tried. Either that or—he didn't *want* to remember.

His thoughts sunk into the darkness.

“HUH? Miyazawa?” Kana blinked.

She found the young man she'd finished working with the day before standing in the middle of a gallery that few ever visited. He didn't reply. He seemed wholly unaware of Kana's presence, transfixed as he was by the collection before him. His face was even paler than she'd last seen it.

“Hello, Miyazawa? Are you okay?” she called again, starting to approach him.

“Wh-Whoa!” he yelped, jumping a mile. “O-Oh, Fujii... I'm sorry, I was zoning out.”

“No, it's okay. Um...what're you looking at?” she asked.

He was standing in front of an earthenware display. It exhibited items from the early to late Jomon period and the Yayoi period. It included genuine articles as well as reproductions and photographs. Of all the objects, the one directly in front of Miyazawa stood out in particular. It was a pot from the Jomon period, covered with intricate swirls that had been created by embedding straw rope into the clay. The extravagant pattern might have been described as a raging flame or perhaps a snake coiling

around itself. It was a wonderful, strange ornament that really captured the onlooker.

“Uhh...” He hesitated. “I forgot,” he admitted, his tone colored by slight surprise. He looked back at the display in panic, his eyes darting around as if to search out a reason for being there. He’d only just realized where he was, evidently.

Is this guy really okay?

Kana’s brow furrowed in concern. Was he sick? Or...was one of the artifacts affecting him somehow? She only had the confidence to come to such an absurd conclusion because the incident with his arm the other day had been undoubtedly bizarre. The thin, black wrist brace on his right arm was all lumpy, and she could see uneven white bandages poking out from underneath it.

“Miyazawa...are you really okay? You don’t think you have a fever or something?”

She didn’t think she could handle him passing out right there in the museum. For the time being, she suggested that he sit down and drink some water. He followed as she showed him to the staff room.

THE sound of his own moans dragged him out of a light sleep.

It was hot.

The past few days, whenever he managed to nod off, he kept falling back into the same nightmare: everything around him tinged white by the sun as he walked through scorching heat all alone.

In one continuous gulp he downed the contents of a two-liter bottle of water. Rolling over on his futon, he attempted to get comfortable. The futon was surrounded by dozens of empty bottles, all the same brand of mineral water.

It was completely dark outside. He regretted not taking a cold bath, but after seeing his reflection the previous day, he was scared of spending a prolonged period of time near a mirror. In the courtyard, frogs croaked incessantly. Then, beyond that, he heard the roar of a car engine, and the frogs went silent for a moment. The sound was of Ryouji driving up the steep road that led to the estate.

Not long after, he heard the car door slam and the sound of

shoes crunching against gravel. The front door of the house clicked, then footsteps gradually approached.

"Hey, you already sleepin'? That's not like you," Ryouji commented as he opened the door and unabashedly peeked into Misato's room. The light from the walkway outside filtered into the space, and when he caught sight of the sea of bottles that littered the floor, he exclaimed, "Yo, what the hell happened in here?!"

Misato just looked up at Ryouji wearily. "I was hot..." he replied.

He'd never been a fan of hot weather. And in his first year of college, that dislike had morphed into outright hatred. It had never been quite so bad as of late though.

Ryouji gave him an odd look as he groaned and thrashed around on top of his damp futon. "Nah, dude. You can't call that heat fatigue," Ryouji scoffed. "And hey, what happened to your arm?"

The welts on Misato's arm had been getting worse; they'd spread even further since the day before. Misato looked down to find that the poorly wrapped bandage had come undone during his tossing and turning.

Ryouji tiptoed around the scattered bottles and squatted down next to Misato. He yanked on a pull cord, and the light bulb hanging from the ceiling lit up. Misato grunted in discomfort, shielding his eyes. Ryouji gently tugged on Misato's wrist and proceeded to thoroughly inspect the wound.

Misato explained how he'd gotten the injury and how it had progressed over the past few days. Ryouji listened carefully, then hummed in thought.

"Seems like an exorcism curse to me. That really is a nasty burn," sighed Ryouji sympathetically. "That's rough, man. It totally messed you up..." He relinquished Misato's arm and settled cross-legged on the floor.

An exorcism curse...

Misato voicelessly mouthed the words over and over again. If that was true, it was almost as if he weren't human altogether. After all, only spirits could be exorcised.

"I'm not a spirit, though," he protested, even though he knew he was stating the obvious.

Yet Ryouji blinked in consternation. "But..." he began cautiously, his eyebrows shooting up, "even if *you're* human, that

thing...”

“*You must blow into the flute.*” A voice suddenly interrupted him, its whispery tone floating in from outside.

A hushed conversation seemed to be emanating from the depths of the courtyard:

“*He should call it back.*”

“*The flute should work.*”

“*If he plays the flute, it’ll come back.*”

Misato vaguely recalled them saying something like that the night before, too.

“The place is still full of spirits, huh? Actually...aren’t there *more* than usual? Like, over the past three or four days, a ton of ’em suddenly showed up,” Ryouji remarked, sticking his head out of the paper sliding door to peer outside. “Ugh, look at that. You’ve gotta remember to get rid of the big’uns, Misato.” He tutted before ducking his head inside again. “Anyway, what do they even mean? Somethin’ about callin’ it ba—”

He froze when his sunglasses slipped down his nose. His wide, green and silver irises were fixed on Misato.

“...Hey, Misato. Did you *abandon* your pet?” he asked, a slight chill to his voice.

Misato didn’t understand what Ryouji was talking about. He had no memory of ever keeping a pet. All he knew was that the sense of unease inside him suddenly multiplied tenfold.

“I don’t have a pet,” Misato said, blinking in confusion.

Worrying at his lip, Ryouji frowned even deeper in reply.

“Oh, but speaking of flutes...”

Misato had borrowed the stone flute from the museum that afternoon. He couldn’t remember why. He knew he had asked a woman called Fujii for it but already couldn’t recall what else they had spoken about. His memory had been growing fuzzier and fuzzier over the past few days, to the point where his life felt like a waking dream.

“Maybe this is what they mean?” he wondered, lethargically rummaging through his bag to pull out the flute. His right arm stung.

“Welp, there you go. Looks ideal to me.” Ryouji shrugged casually, an unlit cigarette between his lips.

“Why don’t you just smoke that?” Misato asked, nodding toward the cigarette.

“Nah, I know you hate it. If I smoke in here, you might refuse to come home,” he said.

That matter aside, Misato still had no idea what he was supposed to be “calling” with the flute.

“Just blow it already,” urged Ryouji with a grin.

The fact that Ryouji appeared to be enjoying the situation didn’t sit right with Misato. He sat in silence, questioning whether it was really the right thing to do.

“You’ll probably cope better with the summer heat when it gets back, too,” Ryouji added. “If you’d been fine with it gone, this would’ve been a great opportunity to just forget about it. But...you can’t carry on like this. Things could get even worse.”

He was smiling, but Misato couldn’t see his eyes. All Misato could see was a halo of fluorescent light reflecting off the surface of his black sunglasses.

After a long moment of uncertain deliberation, Misato brought the flute to his lips. He gently blew across the hole at its middle point. A cool, breathy tone rang through the humid air. The high-pitched note reigned over the sweltering summer night, commanding a sort of presence.

Misato’s arm felt hot. The burning sensation caused him to let go of the flute, and it dropped onto the futon. He clutched his right arm with his left hand, the curse on his skin reacting violently to the creature that drew ever closer.

Who am I?

The thought echoed in his mind.

Where am I?

His perspective blurred, two different images registering in his brain simultaneously. He could see both from inside the room and from outside it.

Which one am I seeing?

He stretched his arms out, feeling around for something.

Who’s in this body right now?

Something rustled in the trees outside.

...Ah, I’ve found him. He called me back. I’m right here.

A mix of happiness and relief suddenly filled Misato. Before he knew it, a relaxed smile alighted upon his lips.

“Welcome back,” he said absentmindedly, slipping his right hand under his pajamas to gently stroke his left shoulder blade. He could feel rough scales beneath his fingertips. A sense of *finally, I’m*

home ran through him as he did so.

That night, Misato slept with a talisman on his back—just like always.

Chapter 6: The Snake Eater

A calm, subdued atmosphere permeated the Abnormal Disaster Unit office. It was time to go home, and papers rustled quietly as everyone finished up their work.

Haruka Tsujimoto was slowly packing up his things, allowing himself to savor the momentary calm. Obon had passed, and the summer festivities had abated somewhat. People eagerly awaited fall, and preparations for the harvest festival had begun.

As people picked up their bags and walked out of the room with polite bows of their heads, an experienced administrative agent called out to them. Her name was Asaka.

“Someone, *please* take some of the snacks the chief left us! They’ll be past their best-by date soon. Plus, he’ll be in a sour mood if he sees any left over,” she urged, pointing at a box of *manju* the section chief brought back from a business trip. It had been almost a week since he brought them to the office, but the box was still mostly full.

Asaka had been working in the Abnormal Disaster Unit for six years, making her the most senior employee among its administrative staff. There were only a few women working at the office, likely because religious professions were a male dominated field.

The section chief of the Crisis Management Division oversaw the Abnormal Disaster Unit, but he rarely visited the office. He was extremely inexperienced when it came to the sort of issues that the unit dealt with, so he left all decision-making to Yoshida, the unit manager.

“Miyazawa! Take some, or else!” Asaka demanded, accosting the newcomer as he attempted to sneak out the door with a slight bow. The young man’s shoulders hunched up in response to her sharp tone, then he nervously turned back around.

“Oh, uh, I...” he stuttered, flailing as he struggled to decline. Obviously, he wasn’t very good at saying “no.” Haruka knew there was no way Asaka would back down after such a pathetic attempt.

Just as Haruka expected, she thrust manju into Miyazawa's hands the very next moment.

"No, I really don't need... I... I don't like sweets..." protested Miyazawa weakly, but Asaka stridently ignored his refusal.

"What?! *You* don't need 'em?!" she chortled loudly. "With all those bones sticking out, I'd say you're not feeding yourself properly at home! You've lost weight, young man. Maybe you'll fatten up a bit if you eat more sweets!"

Perhaps Miyazawa had suffered from heat fatigue over the summer, because his slim figure was looking even gaunter than usual. Haruka had been mentoring Miyazawa for a while by then, however, and he knew it was true that the boy really couldn't stomach sweets. He felt a little sorry for Miyazawa and thus resolved to rescue his mentee.

"Hey, Asaka. I'll take half of 'em, so don't pressure him too much," he said, sidling up to Miyazawa and sticking out his palm. When Miyazawa turned his head, he had the eyes of someone witnessing a god in the flesh.

Haruka had three sons. They all liked red bean filling, so hopefully the manju would be a big hit.

"Aye, Tsujimoto. Take some for your kiddos," she insisted, relieving Miyazawa of half the burden and passing them to Haruka instead.

"Thank you." Haruka smiled pleasantly, tucking the manju into his bag.

Once the queen of manju departed, Miyazawa thanked him with a timid bow of his head. "I really appreciated that, Tsujimoto."

"Nah, it's nothing. I actually wanted some, tha's all," he said, smiling again.

He was very fond of Miyazawa. Though over thirty-five, Haruka was the third youngest employee in the whole office. Until recently, the only person younger was one of the administrative staff, which had made Haruka the youngest of the specialists. But since Miyazawa joined, he'd really enjoyed his role as mentor, especially since Miyazawa was quick on the uptake. It was a pleasure to watch him learn and grow.

"Listen, though—if yeh're really struggling with heat fatigue, don't push yehself. Things aren't so busy right now, so if yeh really can't cope, don't hesitate to take sick leave, all right? Besides, yeh haven't even taken yer summer vacation yet, have yeh?" Haruka

suggested.

Their job wasn't a highly paid one, nor was it easy. The number of days that each employee was allowed off did comply with legal standards—if government institutions were corrupt and unfair to their employees, public confidence in them would suffer. There was an unspoken expectation for civil servants to partake in society at a personal level as well as a professional one, so it was surprisingly easy to apply for annual paid vacation in order to attend school events and regional activities.

Although Obon wasn't officially recognized as a national holiday, employees were given three days of summer vacation that they could take at any point from July to September. And because Obon was such a busy period for the Abnormal Disaster Unit, many of its staff took their summer vacation after July's immense workload died down.

Haruka believed it was important to get enough rest in order to do a good job. People needed to take breaks if the summer heat was getting to them. They needed to take sick leave if they were unwell.

"Thank you for looking out for me, but don't worry. I'll be okay," Miyazawa said weakly. "Anyway, I'll be off now. Great work today." He gave a casual bow.

In stark contradiction to his words, Miyazawa's feet dragged heavily along the floor as he trudged out of the room. Haruka's eyebrows drew together in concern as he watched the boy go. He turned around to see that Yoshida was the only other person left in the office. Their eyes met.

"...What're we gonna do with him?" Yoshida sighed, leaning back in his chair. Apparently, he'd watched the entire exchange.

"He pushes himself too hard," Haruka agreed.

Before Miyazawa arrived, there hadn't been a new addition to the specialist team for a long time. And unlike Haruka, who only knew Shin Buddhist rituals, Miyazawa was somewhat of an elite in the profession; he had a good grasp on all sorts of incantations, with Shintoism as his main practice. Although he'd gone to a university in a Shintoist area, Miyazawa also knew Esoteric Buddhist mantras, Onmyodo rituals, and more. It was unusual for someone to be well-versed in multiple practices the way he was.

That was precisely why they couldn't afford to see him burn out or fall ill. Everyone expected great things from him. He was a

young man who carried the Abnormal Disaster Unit's future on his shoulders.

"Do yeh know what's up with him, Yoshida?" Haruka probed.

"Nah, I dunno, but..." Yoshida paused thoughtfully. "He looks way too out of it for a simple case of heat fatigue. He hasn't said anything to you?"

"He hasn't, but not too long ago he got heat stroke while helping out at the museum. Now that I think about it, he's been real exhausted ever since."

The Museum of History and Folklore had received a generous donation of various ritualistic implements and spell books, and Miyazawa had relocated there for a few days to help sort the artifacts.

"Right. I guess that was when it started..." Yoshida murmured, stroking his chin as he nodded to himself. It seemed like he had an idea of what happened. "If I'm right, I don't think it's heat fatigue at all."

Yoshida crossed his arms, and Haruka tilted his head to one side in confusion.

"What're yeh trying to say?"

"Tsujimoto. Do you know where Miyazawa's from?" Yoshida asked unexpectedly.

"Erm... Hiroshima City, no?" Haruka replied, beginning to list off the fragmentary information he'd heard. "He went to high school in northern Hiroshima and stayed in a student dorm. Then, if I remember correctly, he went to college in—"

Yoshida gave a wry laugh. "Hah! He's got you good."

"...Wha's that supposed to mean?" Haruka asked, narrowing his eyes.

"You all right for time? Take a seat," Yoshida offered, pulling out the chair next to him. Haruka nodded and settled into the chair as told. Yoshida propped both of his elbows up on the desk and rested his chin on his clasped fists.

"At first, I didn't know either, but..." he recalled, his gaze growing distant. "As his mentor, I think it'd be good for you to know at least a little about his past."

Haruka followed Yoshida's line of sight to the window. At that time of year, it wasn't yet dark by that point in the afternoon, but sunset was falling earlier and earlier as the season approached the autumnal equinox. When he left the building, he'd probably be able

to hear the cicadas in their final throes before they succumbed to the cold.

Haruka straightened in his seat, intent on listening carefully. The chair creaked under his weight, and Yoshida eyed it before flashing him a strained smile.

Yoshida sighed before asking, “I’m sure you’re aware of the Narukami family in Izumo. Have you ever heard the rumors about their eldest son?”

The Narukami family...

He repeated the name to himself silently. Every medium had heard of them. They were based in Izumo but didn’t worship Okuninushi, the god of magic and medicine enshrined at the Izumo Grand Shrine. Instead, they revered an even older earthly deity—Naruikatsuchi—as their progenitor. They’d passed down ancient invocations and rituals for generations, even before Shintoism was standardized at a national level. They had never received recognition as a religious organization, however, so they still operated as a clan of mediums—one of the few families who yet did.

Over time they had developed many divination techniques and incantations that could only be found in Japan. Using ancient Chinese Shintoism and the way of the yin and yang as a foundation, they had combined elements of Japanese Shintoism, Esoteric Buddhism, and Onmyodo. For that reason, many considered the Narukami family to be a clan of onmyoji.

Despite their fame, they bore no connection to onmyoji who were employed as government officials in the ancient imperial court, onmyoji such as Abe no Seimei. Ultimately, they were just civilian Shintoist exorcists who incorporated Onmyodo into their rituals. In order to differentiate such exorcists from the prestigious onmyoji appointed by the imperial court, they were called “private” onmyoji.

“Hmm... Aye, I remember. It was a few years back, no? People were calling him...the Snake Eater? Something like that, anyway,” Haruka recollected, wrinkling his nose as he did so. Yoshida nodded.

There was a rumor that the son of the Narukami family head had been cursed by his own relatives—forced to eat a snake spirit that had been created via incantation. But he’d managed to tame the snake and use it to drive the one who forced it upon him to

death's door.

It had been a huge scandal among psychics a few years past. Since the Narukami family, noted for their unrivaled power, presided over the entire Chugoku region, the boy at the center of their dramatic internal squabble was given an equally dramatic epithet by wagging tongues. Haruka had no interest in rumors whatsoever, but even he hadn't been able to avoid hearing all the gossip. He wasn't proud of the fact that he could still remember the whole affair.

The Narukami Snake Eater.

He hesitated to say the title out loud; the boy was quite obviously the victim of the situation, and yet people had given him that stupid, sensationalist nickname.

"This might be rude of me to say, but I always thought that the boy must've become a recluse. I was shocked to learn he hadn't, to say the least," Yoshida hinted.

Haruka had an inkling of what he was getting at.

After the conflict, the boy had disappeared, and his whereabouts were unknown. The Narukamis took great pride in their authority over Izumo, and they hesitated to admit responsibility for anything—much like politicians. In other words, when they said "whereabouts unknown," Haruka had assumed they didn't simply mean he'd run away from home. It was more likely they meant he would never step foot in public society ever again—alive or dead.

"If I remember correctly, when they tried to curse him with the snake, he..."

"Consumed it, I suppose. If you wanna know the full story, you'll have to ask him yourself, but I reckon an exorcism curse's been affecting his physical health."

Yoshida went on to tell Haruka about the time he directed an exorcism incantation toward Miyazawa's back and was startled by the boy's violent reaction to it. The spell wasn't supposed to affect humans, so Yoshida had carried out a more comprehensive background check.

"Yeh mean...he has a snake *inside* him?" Haruka breathed.

"That's what I think. Either way, devils and angels don't exist in our line of work. Just like the rest of us, he's straddling the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. In fact, being closer to the Other Side might even give him an advantage as

an exorcist. Still, as long as it doesn't get in the way of his work, I guess it doesn't really matter."

Haruka had to admit that his curiosity about Miyazawa far prevailed over any feelings of disgust. After all, there was no way to clearly distinguish between Japanese gods and demons.

What kind of person was he? How had he managed to consume the snake and make a Narukami curse rebound on its caster at the tender age of eighteen? No one had ever mentioned any of his relatives dying, but at a certain point, discussion of the caster's condition had abruptly ceased. Perhaps potential gossipers had been met with rather severe retaliation.

And the boy's mother was apparently a normal citizen with no ties to the occult, while the head's legal wife was from an esteemed family based in Iwami. Haruka had to wonder...between Miyazawa and his legitimate siblings, who possessed more power?

His head was swimming with questions. Other people must have had qualms with the lack of information about the situation too.

"I gotta say...appearances really can be deceiving," Haruka said, smiling.

Miyazawa was a gentle-natured young man with good manners. Haruka couldn't imagine the boy consuming an evil serpent and refracting a deadly curse at someone, though he was aware of the huge variety and scale of the spells Miyazawa had mastered. Thus far, Miyazawa hadn't had many opportunities to put them into practice, but he had a thorough fundamental understanding of all sorts of rituals, and Haruka was a little surprised by just how quickly he learned new things.

Put simply, private onmyoji possessed general knowledge of pretty much anything to do with the occult. Before the government drew an official line between the ancient religions, classifying them as either Shintoism or Buddhism, the Japanese people's faith was mixed with various aspects from other countries' versions of Buddhism and Onmyodo. Until that point, religion had always developed depending on influences from a range of different beliefs. Private onmyoji specialized in incantations that drew from all those diverse practices and made them their life's work. Esoteric Buddhist mantras, Onmyodo talismans, Shintoist invocations... Onmyoji were well versed in almost every religious custom Japan had to offer.

Yoshida nodded. "I know. He doesn't exactly have a

threatening aura.”

Yoshida was a Shugendo devotee. Shugendo’s roots were in mountain worship from times long past. It later evolved, syncretizing Esoteric Buddhism, Taoism, and Onmyodo. Practitioners trained in the mountains and were experts in using the powers nature awarded them to perform miracles for the greater populace.

It wasn’t as though Miyazawa had cursed someone of his own volition. Haruka saw no reason to grill him about his past after they’d already spent a lot of time together but was worried that the creature inside him might cause trouble on jobs. Foremost, there was a chance an exorcism spell might hit and harm him. Secondly, there was the possibility that the serpent itself might hurt someone.

“As it stands, we have no reason to believe the creature will lose control, to be honest. And I kinda missed my chance to bring it up with him, but...” Yoshida frowned. “If he’s not feeling well, I feel like we need to ask if there’s anything to worry about in a worst-case scenario.”

Haruka nodded in agreement. “But...how should we broach the subject...?”

If they spoke to him at work, he’d probably be more guarded. Considering the gravity of the topic, it might be difficult for him to open up if he wasn’t sure how they would react. It was important to prevent making him feel like they were cornering him or shaming him for hiding his past.

“Hmm. He drives to work, so it’d be a bad idea to invite him out for a drink. Maybe it’d be best to approach him during lunch break or ask him to eat with us after work,” Yoshida suggested, crossing his arms. He’d evidently had the same thought as Haruka.

“Just wondering, but...didn’t anyone catch on when he applied for the job?” Haruka asked, staring up at the ceiling in a state of half disbelief.

“Well, he’s never been registered as a Narukami, y’see; he’s a Miyazawa on all his legal documents and always has been. Plus, the section chief and all the higher ups know nothing about our world. I mean, I *did* get to observe the practical exam, but I never saw him perform any Izumo-specific rituals, so it didn’t occur to me. His university tutor practiced Onmyodo, so I just assumed he learned extra stuff there.” Yoshida chuckled. “Oh, how wrong I was.”

Miyazawa had graduated from college having completed three

different Shinto-focused courses and applied to Tomoe Town Hall with the skills he acquired there as his selling point—even though the fact that he grew up under Narukami instruction would’ve given him a huge advantage, had he shared it. Instead, he abandoned his identity as Misato Miyazawa—the eldest Narukami son, the Snake Eater—and moved to Tomoe as a total nobody.

“Either way, he’s our future superstar. Let’s try talking to him tomorrow,” Yoshida decided, standing up from his desk. By that time, the scenery out the window was bathed in the dark of night.

“YO, Misato!” called Ryouji from the corridor, peeking into the room to see the young man gazing into the sunset.

“Mmh...?” he responded listlessly.

The buzzing of cicadas rang out through the darkening summer evening, and Misato watched the courtyard from the edge of the dim room. Once again, he hadn’t turned the lights on.

Ryouji gave a light sigh. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet,” Misato murmured.

“You’re gonna shrivel up and die again, y’know. Don’tcha got any food?”

“I’m *already* shriveling up,” Misato sighed, rolling back onto the tatami-covered floor. His yukata and ponytail of long, black hair splayed out across it. “...I hate summer,” he added in a plaintive whisper.

What had happened was likely still taking a toll on him. It had been almost a month, but he was still complaining about the heat. Ryouji ran a hand through his blond hair in frustration.

Out of nowhere, Misato stuck a hand up into the air. Ryouji shifted his glasses down his nose and saw something perched on Misato’s finger. It was a small bird—one that normal people couldn’t usually see. It was a *yosuzume*—a sparrow yokai.

The weightless sparrow began to morph into a large moth, its silhouette blurring and wavering as it transformed. It took off from Misato’s finger and tried to slip into his sleeve. Just as it was about to flit inside, Ryouji repelled it with a mudra.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doin’?” he snapped, his tone low. Why would an onmyoji working in public office—of all people—want to let a specter invade his body?

“Meh...” Misato answered vaguely. He was a husk of a man.

He's been really withdrawn lately...

Ryouji's brow furrowed in concern, and before he knew it, he was stepping toward Misato.

Not long past, the snake spirit living inside Misato's body had gone missing. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say the snake had been forcibly evicted. Presumably, it'd occurred at work, when Misato handled some papers scrawled full of exorcism curses.

Ever since then, Misato spent the evenings in a bleary trance, heat exhaustion still weighing heavily upon him. Because he barely spoke, Ryouji didn't have the faintest idea of what had affected him so severely. But after seeing the room become a miserable sea of empty water bottles that eventful night, Ryouji made an effort to visit him most days, even if just to check he was still alive.

During the separation, Misato drained a crate of two-liter bottles on a daily basis. The one demanding water wasn't actually Misato himself, but the snake that had been ousted from his body as it tried to find its way back home under the heat of the blazing sun. Although Ryouji often referred to the serpent as Misato's pet, in reality, their bond ran much deeper. It was more like they were two parts of a single being.

As Misato stretched out languidly on the floor, the nape of his neck shone white in the twilight glow. His pajamas fluttered loose when he lay down, sliding off his shoulders. Long, stray strands of hair cascaded from his neck to his shoulder and eventually to his exposed back. Ryouji could see something on his shoulder blade, something pale and hard glinting under the gloomy light. They were white snake scales.

“Doesn't matter. He'll just eat it anyway,” Misato suddenly replied indolently, as if he'd only just remembered the fact.

He was referring to the serpent traversing his insides, no doubt. Ryouji had once witnessed it sneaking about while Misato slept. A chill ran up Ryouji's spine at the mere thought of it. His body tensed in response to the memory, and not just in fear.

It really did look beautiful under the moonlight. I don't think that's the sort of praise he wants to hear, though...

The snake was a pure, pearly white and was enchanting to behold. He recalled how it had emitted an ice-cold breeze as it approached, then coolly slinked past him. Given the rumors, Ryouji would've assumed that the fiend tamed by the Snake Eater was a

terrible, demonic creature full of the caster's hate. In actuality, its form was that of a strong, beautiful spirit.

He released the breath caught in his throat and crouched down next to Misato. "Listen—I don't know what's got you down so bad, but you're gettin' careless, Mr. Civil Servant," he huffed. He grabbed hold of Misato's bare shoulder and yanked it toward him, rolling the man over with a *thwump*. Misato lay motionless on his back, staring up at Ryouji.

His naked skin was cold to the touch, as if his body heat had been sapped away. His eyes were a rich, jet black—especially dark compared to Ryouji's—and they regarded him vacantly, glazed over. Those eyes were constantly gazing into darkness. Misato had long grown accustomed to lounging in the midst of creatures that were not of that world as well as establishing emotional ties with them.

His hollow gaze met Ryouji's fixed stare. He squinted a little but otherwise didn't react to the accusation.

During the day, Misato put on a brave face and struggled through each hour on the job, pretending nothing was wrong. He plastered his usual enigmatic smile on his face and interacted cordially with those around him, throwing himself into his work like many recent graduates did. If he let on that he wasn't doing well, it was possible his superiors would force him to explain why. So if he didn't keep up the pretense, he would have to reveal his true self—and the serpent's existence—to his colleagues. Ryouji could tell that was the last thing he wanted.

Welp, I guess he lets his guard down around me more than other people. I already saw the snake with my own eyes, so he couldn't hide it even if he wanted to.

Maybe it was fate. Neither of them had families, and they were both young men living in a town where no one knew them. And on top of that, they were in the same line of work. When Ryouji first offered Misato the outbuilding, he hadn't necessarily intended to buddy up with the guy. But after spending a lot of time together, he'd come to see Misato as both a close friend and good company.

"Hey! You alive? Say somethin', you jerk," he growled, slamming both of his hands down on the floor on either side of Misato's head. From above, Ryouji raked his eyes over the handsome features of the man's face.

He was very androgynous in appearance, with his porcelain

complexion and slender body. Straight, obsidian-black hair fell across his forehead, the glimpses of skin underneath reminding Ryouji of spirits in the night. His striking beauty was yet another factor that set him apart from other humans; it gave him a sort of ethereal air.

Darkness suited him well. Not just in a metaphorical sense either: he truly was toeing the boundary between the twilight of death and the realm of the living—and he was at unique risk of falling into the void. If Misato Miyazawa lost the will to cling to the human world, it wouldn't be long before the Other Side devoured him whole.

"Hey, Ryouji..." Misato began weakly, slowly outstretching his pale fingers. He hooked one over the bridge of Ryouji's sunglasses and gently pulled them off. Ryouji's vision brightened ever so slightly. "Do you ever get sick of yourself?"

Ryouji narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out what Misato meant. With his sunglasses gone, he could see the snake creeping across Misato's exposed chest: several crimson lines stood out from the pale skin, undulating with the snake's movements. They resembled long brushstrokes or the initial outlines of a tattoo. The serpent slithered in coils just below the surface, its presence indicated only by those vague ruby-red stripes.

In the past, Ryouji had barely been able to see it, but perhaps the creature felt no need to hide from him anymore after he'd stumbled across its true form. Perhaps it represented a change in Misato's feelings.

"How so?" Ryouji replied quietly.

Misato hummed. "Like...the color of your eyes or the fact that you can see things..."

The bizarre, silvery green eyes that granted him the power to see more than he was supposed to—even if he didn't want to. His eyes that stood out so much that people could tell he was different with the briefest of looks.

"You're a psychic, and one might say your eyes are basically heresy... Have you ever tried to distance yourself from your own identity?" Misato asked.

"Well, yeah. I think there's a good chance," answered Ryouji, as though he were talking about someone else altogether. A slight frown formed on Misato's doll-like face, his brows knitting together. Evidently, he couldn't work out why Ryouji had responded so

obtusely.

The corners of Ryouji's lips turned up in a small smile. "...Cause I don't remember, *remember?* I know so little about my 'normal' past that I never even imagined people callin' me a heretic," he said, shrugging.

Ryouji had no memories of his childhood. Not of his family, his hometown, his school—nothing at all. His life as Ryouji Karino began when he was taken off the streets by a man who self-identified as a tengu. For all he knew, he had never attended school; such aspects of the average boy's existence could only be experienced through movies and books as far as Ryouji was concerned.

"Life sucks sometimes, I know. But humans have the power to keep on livin', yeah?" He smiled, glancing meaningfully at Misato.

Misato frowned uncertainly, as though he wanted to say something. A nearby cricket sang, its constant chirps filling the silence.

Once the serpent returned, the quantity of specters roaming the courtyard had dwindled back down. And although Misato never exorcised any of them—he had merely manifested a barrier around the outbuilding—the number wandering the Karino estate had decreased dramatically since he first moved in.

At first, Ryouji had assumed he was dispatching them with mantras...but in retrospect, the real explanation was obvious. It made sense that entities who dwelled across the divide would sense the snake's presence much more readily than a human could. Ryouji believed they kept away because they could tell how big and dangerous the spirit was in comparison to themselves.

He'd known Misato was hosting a "pet" ever since they first met. That day, he'd taken off his sunglasses to see it skillfully hiding within. Apparently, it was so visibly indistinct because Misato sealed it at night with the aid of talismans. Ryouji would probably have never noticed it if not for his tengu eyes.

It was a good thing he had. Meeting Misato had been an extraordinary stroke of luck for Ryouji. Of course he valued the fact that they were in the same business and that the guy was a good friend he could take it easy around. But Misato was even more than that.

Not to be dramatic, but he's my savior. He saved my life.

It had been a year and a half since Ryouji arrived in Tomoe,

and he'd come for a reason. Misato and the snake had bought him enough time to escape his pursuers. Misato had no idea, but being indebted to him, Ryouji at least wanted Misato to find a place where he could be himself.

"I mean, look at me—I ain't 'normal' in the slightest, but I still managed to find somewhere I could fit in. You're bein' too pessimistic, man," Ryouji assured him.

The dude was probably having doubts about his job, having rushed into the endlessly demanding civil service. Ryouji thought that sort of work suited Misato much more, however, than straying down the wrong path and exploiting his talents for money alone.

Misato didn't acknowledge his words of comfort.

"Either way, you gotta eat. If you wanna have an existential crisis, you can at least leave it 'til after dinner, aight?" Ryouji pressed.

At some point, the light of dusk had completely faded, leaving them in shadow. Ryouji pried his sunglasses away from Misato. Donning them again, he saw the world shrouded in an even darker tone, the faintest of outlines the only details he could make out.

"I'll whip you somethin' up, so make sure you eat it all. I'll tack the charge on to your rent, yeah?" he said as he entered the western-style room, turning on the light. He started rummaging through Misato's fridge.

Finally, he heard a small grumble from behind him.

Chapter 7: A Meal Always Tastes Better in Good Company

HE looked at the bowl of thin, white noodles in front of him and at Ryouji sitting cross-legged opposite him. Because there was no substantial food in Misato's fridge, Ryouji had ended up bringing some over from the main house and heating it up for him.

"Eat up," Ryouji ordered, folding his arms haughtily.

Misato had always thought Ryouji was just like him, adrift in deep water and holding his breath. If that was true, he could be around Ryouji without feeling inferior for once.

The way he tried to deceive himself was nothing short of shameful.

Ryouji was a psychic, too, and would always have to live with those peculiar eyes of his. Misato had no doubt that Ryouji faced many hardships in his life, but the sheer strength with which he took everything in stride was almost dazzling.

"All right. Thank you," Misato said as he dug in.

"Sure." Ryouji shrugged, then smirked. "That was a gift from a customer for Obon. You'd better savor it, 'cause it's gonna cost ya."

"What...?" groaned Misato, furrowing his brow in dismay. The noodles slipped through his chopsticks, splashing back into the soup bowl. Then he remembered the manju that'd been forced on him at work. "Can I pay in manju?" He could only hope they hadn't been crushed in his bag.

"Uh, why would *you* have manju?" Ryouji raised an eyebrow. "Lemme guess. That a gift, too?"

"Yeah. I can't eat them, so..."

He hated all sweets, but manju were particularly bad. The reason was simple: they'd made him vomit within an inch of his life.

"What did red bean paste ever do to you?" Ryouji shook his head in exasperation. He had an extremely sweet tooth; of course he wouldn't understand. With a wink, Ryouji was already rifling through Misato's work bag, and Misato answered it with a roll of

his eyes.

"Gave me food poisoning once, a long time ago. I almost died," he said seriously.

"For real?" Ryouji grimaced. "I wouldn'ta thought you could even *get* sick from old manju." He produced the misshapen confections from Misato's bag and gleefully tossed one into his mouth.

"Well, what do you expect if there's a snake stuffed inside it?" Misato shrugged before slurping up a procession of noodles.

"Oh...right," Ryouji conceded, his tone mixed with sympathy.

Once upon a time, Misato honestly liked Japanese sweets. But it was like many people said: when a particular food makes someone seriously sick, their body often comes to reject it after that point. Sure enough, ever since that day, anything containing red beans had an awful effect on him. He couldn't stomach them anymore.

An electric fan rotated back and forth, spurting gusts of wind across his back each time it faced him. The fluorescent, cord-operated light bulb illuminated the dreary room, and small flies danced in the light that spilled through the insect screen in the window. A cricket in the vicinity chirped, and the sound of water gushing into the pond wended through the air.

The chilled noodles sent a nice, cool sensation slipping down his throat. It was the barest of dishes, lacking any sides, but ideal for his exhausted body.

They ate in silence for a while. Ryouji held a manju in one hand and scrolled through his phone with the other. Without a TV, there was nothing to fill the quiet except tranquil stillness.

"Thank you for that," Misato said gently, placing his chopsticks down before politely holding his palms together in thanks.

"Yeah, sure," Ryouji said with a wave of his hand. He'd already finished every last bite of manju and was leisurely sprawling on the floor. "You can do the dishes y'self though," he added with a *humph*.

There was no cause for Ryouji to stay, but he showed no sign of leaving. Misato must have worried him a fair bit. He knew Ryouji was far nicer than his exterior suggested.

"You know, Ryouji..." he began, pouring some barley tea into his cup from a bottle. "You really are tenderhearted."

He chose his words carefully. If Misato called Ryouji a soft touch, he'd probably get mad. "Tenderhearted" sounded a little old fashioned, but it felt right the moment it settled on his tongue.

Even so, Ryouji grumbled unhappily in reply. "Well, if I weren't, I wouldn't bend over backward just for some random hobo I found on the street," he said defensively, pouting.

Misato had never doubted the value of his own life. Not a shred of him felt other people's approval was necessary to simply *be*. He couldn't have made the decision to consume the snake if he even slightly doubted his right to live. When it came to others needing *him*, however, or whether they were willing to maintain a relationship with him...that was another matter entirely. He wanted others to think he was worth their time.

In all honesty, Misato questioned if his and Ryouji's relationship was really worth all the trouble Ryouji went through.

"*Misato*," Ryouji said in an accusatory tone. "You're thinkin' negative crap again, ain'tcha?"

Misato couldn't deny it.

Still on the floor, Ryouji nimbly reached below the hem of his shorts and scratch his bare calf with a thumb.

"I don't remember anything 'bout my parents, y'know. I don't have any memories of goin' to school, and my adoptive dad was one shady dude. Still, I can read and write pretty well, and I'm not too rusty on math or general knowledge." He hummed.

"That's all thanks to my Shugendo buddies. I never got taught English, but...oh well. Anyway, there were a few old guys in the business who were kinda like schoolteachers. My old man made a run for it about ten years ago, so while other kids my age were still in school uniforms, I was strugglin' to make ends meet...and I lived to tell the tale. I couldn't have done it without the support of other people in the industry," he said sagely.

Misato remembered Ryouji had said he'd moved to Tomoe from Tokyo the previous year. And before that, he'd lived on the outskirts of the city in a somewhat disreputable community of psychics. Not many in their profession could say their career had been smooth sailing. People often fell through the safety nets that were in place for regular citizens. Therefore, Misato gathered, Ryouji never hesitated to help someone in need, even if they had only the vaguest of connections to one another.

"You can call it kindness all ya want. It sounds nice that way,

but in reality, it's more like a sort of insurance. People helped me out that same way countless times. Usually, you don't get the opportunity to pay that person back directly. If you see someone in need, you help 'em, then get on with your day. That's all. You meet 'em, then they're gone. If you wanna pay 'em back, do it by helpin' someone *else*. I got to where I am now by followin' that code."

"Wow, really?" Misato replied, a wistful sort of admiration in his voice. From Misato's point of view, it sounded like some kind of fairy tale—especially since he'd never been to such a big city. "Do you keep in contact with any of your friends from Tokyo? Knowing you, you must've been pretty popular back there. Don't any of them want to come and see what country life's like?" he wondered.

A beat of silence passed.

"...Never reject those who come and never chase those who leave. That's the number one rule of that place. I mean, I only ever knew people on a surface level, never exchanged contact info with most of 'em. All the phone numbers I got were the kind that probably wouldn't connect after a few months," snorted Ryouji.

In other words, they believed every chance meeting was like destiny—destiny for that single moment and no more.

Misato smiled. "I just can't imagine a world like that."

He still couldn't piece together why Ryouji had come to Tomoe in the first place. If Ryouji was from Kanto, surely it made more sense to travel somewhere less obscure. He recalled Ryouji saying something about "acquiring" the house from a friend but not seeming all too keen to reveal much beyond that.

Misato had his own fair share of secrets, however, so he couldn't exactly nose around in Ryouji's. All he knew for certain was that both he and Ryouji were humans teetering on the line between life and death and also the sort of people who could find comfort in an abandoned village. That was the most important thing.

"*You're* pretty convenient, though." Ryouji grinned, looking up at Misato from behind his skewed sunglasses. His silvery green eyes glowed, reflecting the fluorescent light.

"Convenient?" Misato echoed, one eyebrow quirked as he placed his cup of barley tea down. "Convenient how?"

"Well, there's the talismans you put up at the back of the estate. You're way better at those than I am, and they last much longer, too. Also, the gardening goes faster with two of us. And best

of all, the number of troublemakers visitin' the house has gone right down since you arrived," he listed, smiling.

It was true that Misato had always been pretty adept at making all sorts of different talismans. And because he needed a good supply of them to keep the snake sealed away, he had plenty of spares to go around. Add the snake's repellent-like effect on other spirits, and Misato was actually contributing a lot to maintaining the peace of the estate.

"Why, you're welcome," Misato replied jokingly. "I'm not really doing anything special though."

The serpent liked to feed on specters, so spirits on the smarter end of the spectrum tended to keep well away. It had escaped Misato only once, but nevertheless they seemed to understand that there was a predator in the area.

"So? With that huge ol' snake of yours, that's enough to send 'em runnin'. Before you got here, the situation was dire, man. The noise kept me up *all night* on a fair few occasions," Ryouji grouched. When it came to complaining about the specters, he barely even paused for breath.

Misato laughed, his shoulders shaking a little. It was a nice change to hear that his big secret was actually helpful to someone.

"Well, I'm glad I could help." Misato smiled at him.

Misato would never regret choosing survival over death, but he did constantly wonder what his life would be like had he never encountered the snake. Whenever he was reminded of how taboo his existence was, even among other psychics, the bitterness gnawing at him intensified.

He used to fantasize about getting rid of the snake. Unfortunately, when precisely that happened, he discovered just how deeply intertwined they were. The pain of that realization was like being stabbed with inescapable reality all over again, only deeper still: Misato was the one who'd called the lost spirit back. *He* was the one who'd accepted its return. Even if he sequestered it away with a talisman, the truth was that the snake was part of him. The whole experience had only reaffirmed that fact.

Or at least, he'd *tried* to accept it. In the end, he'd spiraled into yet another depressive episode.

In addition to dealing with the lost snake incident, work had been very hectic over the Obon period, and then all the stress he'd been through took a toll on his body, putting him in a bad place

mentally.

“Believe me when I say I’m forever grateful,” Ryouji chuckled. “Although...ain’t that an albino rat snake? Venomous snakes aren’t usually white, right? So is it nonvenomous? Also, that thing’s freakin’ *huge*.”

“Oh, uh...I’m not a snake expert or anything, so I’m not sure why that is. I *do* have a feeling it used to be black at first though... almost as if it lost its color over time.”

When he was forced to ingest the serpent, it was no bigger than a manju and had been sealed inside an implement small enough for him to swallow. He never actually faced the snake directly, so the feeling of darkness it exuded was merely an impression that arose from the murky sensation of it slithering inside him. It came to him in the form of a curse imbued with an absurd amount of spite and loathing. Misato had bounced the curse right back at the caster, the rebound strengthened by his *own* anger.

He had thought that the end of it. However, shortly after he started college, the snake suddenly reappeared—though he was sure he’d returned it to its master along with the curse. And for some reason, it had turned white.

“The hell?” Ryouji scowled in response as he nimbly leapt into a sitting position. He must’ve trained day in and day out to gain such swift command of his body. He propped one elbow up on the table and rested his chin on his palm, a sly smirk on his lips.

“Okay, but if you’ve got a white snake on your side, why’re you so freakin’ poor?” he asked with a bark of laughter.

Right. White snakes are supposed to represent luck with money.

“Shut up!” Misato squawked, his eyebrows high on his forehead. “It brings me anything *but* fortune. In fact, it’s the *reason* for my lack of money. If I don’t seal it, it’ll go rogue. Talisman paper’s *expensive*, you know!” he protested, his voice rising higher and higher in pitch.

It ate away at Misato’s salary every month. If he skimmed on the tools and materials required to make talismans, their effect weakened immensely. When he’d run out of money earlier in the year, the snake broke free for a midnight jaunt and feasted on various specters. Ryouji had witnessed it for himself.

Ryouji hadn’t been all too perturbed by the experience, so thankfully it was ultimately just something they could laugh about. Things wouldn’t have smoothed over quite so easily back in his

college dorm. If anyone had sighted the snake, even once, public uproar would have been inevitable. Unlike where he currently lived, the dorms were located downtown, where the population density was quite high. Thus, despite the unpleasant sensation of violent wriggling each time the snake sensed a specter, he'd kept it imprisoned within.

"You mean you don't feed it? Poor thing," Ryouji replied with a raised eyebrow. He must've thought Misato went without snake food that one time.

Strangely enough, when Ryouji released a huge cackle, Misato couldn't help but let loose a laugh, too. He'd never spoken about the snake so casually before. In fact, just a couple of months prior, he thought the day he could laugh about it with someone would *never* come.

"Well, Shiota doesn't really need feeding, so..." Misato explained nervously, fidgeting. He wasn't used to talking about it, and a wave of embarrassment washed over him.

"*What?*" gasped Ryouji abruptly, sheer astonishment on his face.

Misato grew shier still. "Wh-What do you mean, 'what'?" he fretted.

"...Is that *its* name?"

Apparently, "Shiota" was the part he was so taken aback by.

"Yeah..." Misato said blankly.

Ryouji's face fell into a look of utter disappointment.

"What's with that?! Did your ability to name things die along with that curse?!" he cried before heaving a huge, exasperated sigh. He was surprisingly upset by the matter. The snake was white, so why not choose a name with the Japanese word for "white" in it? It made sense.

"What? There's nothing wrong with it!" Misato retorted.

"Nah, man, there is so much wrong with it. Couldn't your brain cells stretch a li'l bit further?!"

Misato leaned forward over the table, pursing his lips. "Then what would *you* call it?! 'Silvery'? Or '*Rainbow*' or something? Like a twelve-year-old?" he countered.

"Still sounds better than Shiota. I'm tellin' you, there are basic-ass names and then there's *that*," Ryouji spat. He was so insistent that all Misato could do was glumly fall silent.

It wasn't like he'd kept the snake because he wanted to. It was

only natural to give the creature the first placeholder name that came to mind.

Ryouji gazed on steadily as Misato sulked with a dejected pout on his lips. Then, rolling his eyes, Ryouji sighed as he stood up from the table.

“Ugh, whatever. You can call it anythin’ you like,” he said, relenting. “I’m heading out, so just tell *Shirota* I said hi, aight?” He ran his right hand through his hair, then waved before walking away with his back hunched and legs bowed.

Misato watched him leave, still feeling a little offended.

“I think it’s fine as it is. Right, *Shirota*?” he said to the vacant room as he stared at his empty bowl.

He felt a small twitch in his stomach, as if the creature concurred.

MISATO went to work the next day feeling somewhat lighter. At around ten in the morning, Yoshida came to him with a job and requested that he assist Tsujimoto in conducting an inspection of the client’s house. Their destination was Tomoe District, a built-up area on the other side of the river in the heart of Old Tomoe.

It was less than a five-minute drive. Because the investigation would probably span the duration of their lunch break, Yoshida assured them they could eat lunch at a restaurant on their own time. Tsujimoto seemed to agree to the proposal, although his house was nearby. Nonetheless, Tsujimoto had invited Misato out for lunch the moment he arrived to the office that morning, so he hadn’t ordered any food from the company lunch service like he usually would.

Truthfully, Misato was a little nervous about his first meal with a colleague. He braced himself as he climbed into one of the town hall’s cars, Tsujimoto at the steering wheel.

Old Tomoe was divided into two districts, with Tomoe District on the east side of the river and Tokaichi on the west. Town Hall was in Tokaichi, as were the train station, main street, and big-box stores. Across the river, a more antiquated atmosphere dominated in a juxtaposition of old merchant shops and banks and modernist architecture. The commercial quarter along Tomoe District’s central

thoroughfares had been paved with cobbles as part of a scheme to develop it into a tourist attraction.

Tsujimoto pulled up to a construction company on a street that branched off from one of those serene, rustic boulevards. An office faced the road, and a house nestled behind it—probably where the manager of the company lived. From the outside, the office appeared crammed into a small space, but when Misato took a better look, it was larger than he first thought. The house, in contrast, was obviously grand; he wouldn't hesitate to call it a mansion.

Tsujimoto skillfully maneuvered the car into a narrow parking space and announced, "Let's go."

When he pushed open the glass front door of the office and showed Misato inside, a man immediately materialized to welcome them. Misato did a double take when his gaze flitted to the man's face. He'd seen those huge, black-framed glasses somewhere before... He suddenly recalled meeting the man at Town Hall after just a few weeks of working there. Misato remembered his kind disposition and warm voice.

"Oh, hey." The man smiled when their eyes met. Evidently, he remembered Misato, too. "I never thought I'd be comin' to you with a personal matter on our first job together," he said with a strained laugh.

Tsujimoto blinked. "Yeh know each other?"

"Well..."

The man recounted the story of how he and Misato met in front of the Construction Division office some months prior.

"Ah, lemme introduce myself properly this time," he said, holding a business card out to Misato. "I'm Shinobu Takatsuki, the manager of Takatsuki Construction. Pleasure to meet ya."

Misato shakily reached for the card. He'd learned about business card etiquette at career support sessions in college as well as seminars at Town Hall but wasn't used to putting it into practice whatsoever. He'd left his card case back at the office in his desk drawer so all he could do was make sure to take the card with both hands and bow politely.

"May we take a look around?" Tsujimoto prompted, and Takatsuki nodded before leading the two of them to the back.

The walls of the office were decorated with all sorts of photos of the company's accomplishments: from building the Tomoe

Cultural Hall and the library, to constructing roads and bridges, to rendering disaster recovery assistance. Misato understood then why the town hall's Construction Manager had displayed such respect to Takatsuki that day.

Takatsuki ushered them right through the office building and out the back door toward the house behind. He'd said it was a "personal matter," but more specifically, it was something to do with his son. As they walked, Tsujimoto went through the notes he'd taken during Takatsuki's interview to ensure everything was in order. The story went like so:

Takatsuki's son, a boy in his fifth year of elementary school, had been acting strangely of late. After summer break ended, a new semester began, and his son wouldn't wake up on time for school in the morning no matter what Takatsuki did. Then, once he *did* get to school, he ended up falling asleep in class due to a severe lack of energy. The school contacted Takatsuki, telling him to help fix his son's "summer vacation sleep schedule," but apparently the boy wasn't the sort of kid to sleep late in the first place.

When he asked his son about it, the child wouldn't give him a straight answer and seemed to be hiding something. Takatsuki initially assumed he was secretly staying up past bedtime. Eventually, however, when Takatsuki pursued the topic again, the boy finally divulged he was suffering from awful nightmares.

"So, we couldn't work out what was causin' 'em...and then my wife foun' this," Takatsuki said as he escorted them into the house and through to the parlor. The parlor boasted dignified, western-style décor, and a sofa and coffee table occupied the middle of the room. On that table stood an old-looking doll.

"Oh, a Tomoe doll! Wow, it looks like an old'un, too..." Tsujimoto said admiringly.

Tomoe dolls were a kind of figurine that had been produced in the region for generations. They were created by bisque firing a clay figure, then painting on finishing touches in bold colors with chalk and glaze.

Similar dolls were made across Japan for use in the nationally recognized festivals on Girls' Day on March 3 and Children's Day on May 5. In Tomoe, however, the tradition was historically different: regardless of gender, Children's Day took place on March 3, and people gifted Tomoe dolls to babies celebrating it for the first time.

A typical gift for a boy was a doll modeled after Sugawara no

Michizane, who was a scholar, poet, and politician in the Heian period. There were many other variations of Tomoe dolls though, including ones designed to resemble Kintaro, a boy from Japanese folklore with superhuman strength.

“You got it. It used to belong to my granddad but has been in storage all this time,” Takatsuki confirmed. When Misato had a closer look, he could see that the doll wasn’t designed to look like Sugawara no Michizane. It looked nothing like Kintaro either. Rather, it was a stern-faced, armored warrior. Its colors were faded with time, and the layers of varnish had lost their shine, an indication of its considerable age. And one of its arms had fallen off.

“I guess he went and decided to rifle through the storeroom, then broke it while he was messin’ around. The wife suggested it coulda cursed ’im. She got real scared ’bout that, so...”

Takatsuki’s son had received his own doll when he was younger, one for the national Children’s Day on May 5. Many households in Tomoe had started to conform to the country-wide holiday customs, so the number of families buying Tomoe dolls had decreased significantly within the past few decades. Furthermore, Takatsuki’s wife had grown up in another prefecture, so she wasn’t as familiar with the dolls—which seemed to make the concept of them being cursed all the more frightening to her.

Silently, Misato had his doubts. Festival dolls were intended to protect the child they were given to; they weren’t the sort of entity that possessed the qualities to curse someone. It appeared Tsujimoto had come to the same conclusion when he frowned and put a hand to his chin in careful thought.

“Even if it’s not yer son’s doll, I don’t see why his great grandfather’s doll would curse him...especially since it’s a charm meant for protection. And now, having seen it for m’self, I don’t feel like it’s evil either.”

Misato nodded timidly in agreement. He couldn’t sense any ill will from the old, broken doll sitting motionlessly in front of them.

“Really? Then maybe there’s some other reason...” Takatsuki hummed. “’Cause nowadays, people say you’re s’posed to only have ’em as a kid, right? Then, when you hit twenty, you’re s’posed to hol’ a memorial service for it. I thought maybe the old’uns were cursed ’cause they ain’t had the service.”

There were a range of different superstitions concerning the dolls. Some households believed that the dolls protected children

from misfortune by suffering in the children's place. To a certain extent, things such as charms and curses were decided by humans rather than gods—from the conventions surrounding them to the effects they had on others. Tsujimoto and Misato couldn't completely rule out Takatsuki's theory, but on the other hand, many families followed the custom of keeping old dolls and decorating their houses with them every year with no issue.

At the very least, the Tomoe doll in front of them seemed like the sort of character that would honor its vow to its former owner and *protect* his descendants, not curse them.

"Aye, we can't say for certain, but that seems unlikely. Is yer son at school today?" Tsujimoto asked.

Takatsuki nodded. "It's a pain gettin' him up in the mornin', but he wants to go. Even though he gets told off for sleepin' in class," he explained. "Or... Well, rather than *wantin'* to go to school, it's more like...he doesn't wanna stay home."

"Something else in the house might be causing it. Would yeh mind if we took a look around?" suggested Tsujimoto. "Miyazawa, if yeh notice anything, speak up. Got it?"

"I will," Misato said, nodding as he stood up to follow.

He didn't doubt there was something supernatural at work. He knew from the familiar slithering sensation in his gut: the snake was alerting him to the fact that there was something "delicious" nearby.

They left the parlor and took a quick tour of the house, on the lookout for ghostly presences all the while. He and Tsujimoto exchanged glances a few times but didn't find anything particularly noteworthy.

It feels like it's scattered across the whole place... Each time I sense something, it's only a tiny presence. There's no way to figure out where it's coming from.

Regardless, it didn't seem like they'd be pinpointing the cause, sealing the spirit, and resolving the matter all in one day. They would probably have to visit the house multiple days in a row to see if anything changed. Misato was mulling over their next steps when a thought occurred to him. He froze mid-step.

Actually, maybe I could use my hair... But how should I broach the subject?

Misato kept his hair long in case he needed to use a specific ritual, a secret art passed down to him through the Narukami line.

Misato was never going to succeed his father, but he'd been taught the family's clandestine rites like any other direct descendant, nonetheless.

The ritual in question was a type of control spell that involved the caster tying their hair and summoning a familiar. However, unlike the animal-based servants that Shugendo ascetics, Buddhist monks, and regular onmyoji used, the familiars were born from the caster's hair. It was a very unique ritual that generated something like an alter ego.

He could make figures of animals or people by weaving strands of his long hair with thin strips of glue-covered paper. The types of familiars he could conjure were limited in size though: butterflies might be used to search for people, rats could function as lookouts, and swallows might be employed to mount a defense or attack. The conjured beings—or *shikigami*, as they were known—were thus best utilized in small-scale operations.

It wasn't exactly an *impressive* ritual on the face of it, but shikigami had a huge range of practical uses and didn't drain the caster's spiritual power all too much after their initial creation. Neither did they try to run away, and any harm that befell them had no effect on the caster.

But he'd give away his identity by casting such a distinctive ritual. Logically, he knew he couldn't hide who he was forever, but he couldn't quite find the confidence to mention the ritual to Tsujimoto.

The Narukami Snake Eater.

Ryouji had been all the way out in Kanto at the time of the incident, and even *he* had heard about it. So there was no way Misato's colleagues, who lived in the prefecture right next door to Shimane, didn't know the story. Every single person in the office would know who he was.

In the wake of the whole exorcism curse debacle, Misato had only just barely gotten his head around the fact that he'd become one with the snake. He was struggling to come to terms with the possibility that he might not even be *human* anymore; he was hardly ready to tell other people about it.

When I took the exam for this job, I pretended I was growing my hair for a different ritual, but...what's the point of growing it if I don't actually use it?

If he were to conjure a few rats and place them at different

locations throughout the house, no one would have to stay there outside of work hours. If the rats noticed anything, they would appear in Misato's dreams to show it to him.

I'll have to tell Tsujimoto... But it's awkward when we've already known each other for a while...

Misato resumed walking when he realized he was about to get left behind, his steps were slow and unsure as he deliberated his options.

Once they completed a lap of the house, Tsujimoto glanced at his watch. It was just about noon. Takatsuki kindly offered them lunch, but Tsujimoto politely declined before turning to Misato.

"All right. Shall we go?" he asked. Misato gave a nervous nod in reply and shuffled after Tsujimoto.

Just as Misato was about to leave the building, Takatsuki caught his eye. Takatsuki's friendly face lit up with a beaming smile, and subconsciously, Misato stopped to look back at him.

Why does he keep going out of his way to be so nice to me?

Almost as if he knew what Misato was thinking, Takatsuki gave an uncomfortable chuckle, then patted Misato firmly on the shoulder just like he had when they first met.

"Sorry. I was jus' thinkin' how popular you are," he confessed with a sheepish grin. "I mean, Tsujimoto seems like he's real pleased 'bout havin' someone to mentor for the first time. Yoshida talks 'bout you a lot, too."

As a large company with many jobs in the area, Takatsuki Construction frequently interacted with the Abnormal Disaster Unit on business. For that reason, it seemed Takatsuki was very familiar with the higher-ups of the unit, such as Yoshida and Tsujimoto. Especially Tsujimoto—it was highly likely the two of them often met outside of work, too, since he lived so close by.

"They're a skilled bunch, and I'm sure they welcomed ya with open arms. They're kind people as well as great colleagues, y'know. If there's somethin' on your mind, don't hesitate to confide in 'em, okay?" he encouraged, his voice hearty and reliable.

Again, it was if he'd read Misato's mind. Misato wished he could find the right words to respond. Failing that, he replied with a vigorous nod.

THEY left the car outside the Takatsuki Construction office, and Tsujimoto took Misato to a small restaurant on the corner of the shopping district.

Tsujimoto would most likely insist on paying, so Misato didn't have the guts to order as much as his appetite would prefer. He barely skimmed the menu before deciding on the daily special. Meanwhile, Tsujimoto took a good long look at the menu, then called a waiter over and asked for a katsudon.

One hand clasping a glass of water, Misato bounced his leg restlessly as they waited for their food. He nervously glanced between the TV mounted on the wall and the menu next to him. He'd been working at Town Hall for almost six months but had never been invited to a casual meal with a colleague before, let alone any large drinking parties. Ryouji hadn't quite said as much, but Misato was aware he'd become very withdrawn recently. He couldn't help but worry over what Tsujimoto might want to talk about.

"It's supposed to be fall soon. I wish it'd start getting a bit cooler. Maybe I shouldn't have ordered a hot dish, but y'know..." Tsujimoto commented idly as he took a sip of his water.

"I really hope it will, too... I can't stand the heat," Misato agreed.

Over the past few years, Misato's tolerance for heat had decreased considerably, perhaps due to the snake's inclination toward cool, shadowy spaces. There was no way he could admit that to Tsujimoto outright though, so he chose his words carefully. Unfortunately, it made for extremely boring conversation. He silently squirmed in his seat.

Without a trace of concern for Misato's awkward demeanor, Tsujimoto continued to watch the mindless daytime television playing in the background.

"Aye, exactly," he replied. "The office's hot, but the temple... *Whew*, lemme tell yeh, yeh don't wanna be wearing a priest robe in this heat. They can call it a summer robe as much as they want, but the fact still stands that there's no air conditioning in the temple hall."

"I can imagine," Misato said, wincing. "Speaking of which, isn't your temple somewhere nearby?" He remembered it was a Shin Buddhist temple somewhere in Tomoe District.

"Aye, that's right. If yeh go one street over, it's right there.

Sometimes I come here for a drink in the evenings.”

Tsujimoto seemed to be rather fond of drinking. There were almost no restrictions on practitioners’ daily lives in his sect: marriage, eating meat, and drinking alcohol were all considered questions of individual choice.

In the midst of their shallow small talk, the food arrived.

Misato thought of Tsujimoto as easy to work with as well as a great mentor. Like the manju incident the previous day, there had been multiple occasions when Tsujimoto came to his aid. He also respected Tsujimoto’s hard-working ethic.

He put his hands together in thanks before digging into his meal.

The more I respect him, the more scared I am of disappointing him. I don’t think he’s the sort of person to resent me, but...

Tsujimoto had a house and lived with his wife and children. He had a steady job, too. Because he worked directly under Yoshida, the unit manager, he was a strong contender for becoming the unit manager himself one day. He had plenty of hobbies outside of work, too, and he’d regaled Misato with numerous funny anecdotes about being a father. From Misato’s point of view, his life was perfect.

But no matter how much Misato aspired to Tsujimoto’s example, he would never be able to lead that kind of life. All he could do was chew fried chicken while he stewed in jealousy.

Thankfully, Misato’s appetite had returned since the day before—probably because Ryouji’d let him vent. Somehow, he managed to get the entire meal down. The dish was bigger than it looked, too. He was extremely relieved that Tsujimoto didn’t appear to mind the silence.

When Tsujimoto finished his katsudon, he struck up a new conversation, his tone just as casual as it had been all lunch. “...By the way, Miyazawa. Yer hometown is Izumo, right?”

Misato’s throat immediately constricted, sending him into a coughing fit around a pickled vegetable. “Wh-Wh—” he choked out. “Why...?”

“Oh, Yoshida told me yesterday.”

...So Yoshida did know after all.

He recalled the suspicion in Yoshida’s eyes the day the exorcism mudra hit his back.

Misato sighed in resignation. Rationally, he’d always known it

was selfish to try to conceal his past. It was finally time to talk.

“Um, when you say he *told* you... Did he tell you *everything*?” Misato probed hesitantly.

“Aye, I reckon just about everything.” Tsujimoto nodded plainly, his even-keeled response a stark contrast to Misato’s quivering voice.

Misato couldn’t exactly grill him on what Yoshida had said and why. He was the one keeping secrets, after all.

“Anyway, after that, we spoke about the situation a bit,” Tsujimoto continued, straightening his back to face Misato more head-on. Misato’s heart skipped a beat. “If yeh’re having any trouble with yer health because of yer condition, we’d really appreciate it if yeh could tell us. So as long as we know what’s going on, we can take those things into consideration at work to best accommodate yeh. It’d be awful if yeh had some sort of preventable accident due to our lack of understanding,” he said in a professional tone, quietly enough that no one else could overhear him.

“I’m sorry...” Misato cowered, bowing his head in apology.

They wanted him to share more details so they could avoid any mishaps. Not because they wanted to know on a personal level, but because it was necessary in order to do their jobs properly. It wasn’t the sort of thing they should be discussing over lunch, Misato thought. It would be far more appropriate to call him to Yoshida’s desk and give him a harsh talking-to.

His knuckles turned white with anxiety. Tsujimoto smiled at him sadly and took a sip of his water. The automatic front door opened as a customer left, unleashing a chorus of cicada calls as they clung onto the last moments of summer.

“Nah. So long as yeh understand that, we’re all good. I know I’m only repeating what I said yesterday, but we all have a responsibility to take care of our health. Our job’s a dangerous one.”

“All right,” Misato replied, his eyes cast downward. Judging by the soft lilt to Tsujimoto’s voice, both he and Yoshida were sympathetic to Misato’s situation. That was precisely why Misato was so embarrassed. He had no idea what to say.

A news broadcast began to air on the TV, meaning they only had around ten minutes of lunch break left. In twos and threes, the other customers got up to pay for their meals, then left the

restaurant. Each time the automatic door swished open, the sound of wind chimes tinkled through the air.

"The higher-ups expect great things from yeh, Miyazawa—from me, not so much. I'm just a guy with local knowledge, but yeh've got *real* ability. Make sure yeh don't lose sight of that," he said humbly.

Misato's head shot up at Tsujimoto's self-deprecating tone; how could he say he was "just a guy with local knowledge"?

Tsujimoto shrugged off Misato's reaction with a laugh, then said, "Well, I can't use incantations the way yeh and Yoshida do, and the things I can offer as a specialist are super limited. We don't have many specialists in the first place, so if one of 'em can't really do anything, it's no wonder I got shifted into that sorta role."

While Tsujimoto was a priest, in general the Shin Buddhist sect strived for rebirth in the Pure Land rather than trying to gain any benefits in their ongoing life. As such, even priests weren't taught how to use incantations.

"But, Tsujimoto, you can still..."

Instead of mighty incantations, he had the rare ability of purification. And he could sense spirits, just like Misato. Not to mention, his expertise and powers of observation were admired by the whole unit.

"Aye, there are things I *can* do, and that ability's the only reason I'm still employed. I get that they need me. But still, I'm not talented like yeh are, Miyazawa. We really, *really* need yeh. That's why yeh have to tell us when yeh're burnt out or when yeh're not feeling good. Otherwise, we might lose our most valuable recruit," he said earnestly, a certain tender quality to his tone.

His plea was strangely heartfelt, with a hint of both caution and sentimentality. Perhaps that compassionate aspect of his personality had something to do with his extraordinary purification capabilities.

"I don't really know what yeh were like before yeh started working for us, and I'm not gonna push yeh to talk about anything yeh don't wanna. As I'm sure yeh're already aware, yeh don't gotta submit yer birth certificate or anything to work at Town Hall. We recruited yeh based on yer academic record, skills, and enthusiasm for the job. Yeh never lied on any of the questions we asked, and when we saw what yeh could do, we decided we needed yeh here in Tomoe. There's no reason for yeh to feel inferior just 'cause of

yer past.”

In order to be valued, one either had to be someone people needed to a certain degree or someone with highly regarded qualities. There were a thousand different ways to be useful. Misato and Ryouji, for example, had a mutually beneficial relationship. In some cases, like friendship and romance, people alternated providing emotional support to one another. And of course, there were circumstances where people relied on others for financial aid, too. Of the many reasons to be of value to someone, it was apparently Misato’s talent that appealed to Tsujimoto.

Depending on interpretation, that could be a very cold way of looking at things. In another setting, it might hurt Misato to hear that a friend didn’t care about his identity or his past. However, in that instance, Tsujimoto’s words were a huge weight off his shoulders. All he had to do was the very best he could in the moment—whoever the current version of him was.

He hung his head once more, trying to suppress all the emotions welling up inside him.

Tsujimoto gently patted him on the shoulder. “Right, I’ll settle the bill. Get going, and I’ll catch up to yeh,” he said as he rose from his seat.

Misato gave a small nod in reply.

AFTER lunch, Misato and Tsujimoto returned to the Takatsuki residence amid the late summer heat. Their dark silhouettes stuck fast to the white stone pavement as they walked.

The team really does need me, even as the person I am now... he thought to himself absentmindedly, staring at the way his short shadow followed his feet under the midday sun.

But, when he says he needs me, is the snake really part of that?

A deep confusion coursed through his mind. Half of him couldn’t believe it, while the other half *wanted* to believe it. The contradicting feelings left an uneasy sensation entrenched in his chest.

If Ryouji could just laugh and accept it, then maybe Tsujimoto won’t mind if I...

No, that won’t do. Since he already knows I’m a Narukami, I

should conjure a shikigami. If I don't suggest it now, it'll only be more awkward bringing it up later. He wants my powers, so I might as well use them.

Misato had come to Tomoe utterly alone, looking for a place someone like him might fit in. If his powers were what would enable him to secure that belonging, he would use them as much as he had to. He had the talent he was born with, what he'd learned growing up...and even the thing he'd been forced to take in order to survive.

If Tsujimoto *really* wanted the powers he could offer as his current self, then maybe...

This isn't the time to be shy about it.

He clenched his fists and came to a stop. A distance spread between them as Tsujimoto carried on walking. He felt beads of sweat drip down his temples.

"Hey, Tsujimoto?"

It was the first time he'd spoken since Tsujimoto lectured him in the restaurant. Tsujimoto halted and casually turned around to look at him.

"Hm? What's up?" Tsujimoto blinked, his neutral expression the same as it always was.

That helped Misato remain calm. "I expect we'll have to do a more long-term observation of Takatsuki's house, and...I think my hair might come in handy," he said, grabbing his ponytail over his shoulder. "I can use the Narukami conjuring ritual."

Among the descendants of the dragon god, only those of the Narukamis' direct lineage could use the special ritual. The head of the family was thus required to grow their hair long in order to perform it.

"Oh, aye, that's right...! I should've thought of that; yeh're the head's son, after all," Tsujimoto realized, clapping his hands together with a sparkle in his eyes. Like most psychics, he knew the reason behind the Narukamis' long hair.

Misato nodded slightly. In all honesty, there had been other occasions when the ritual would have benefitted them, but he'd never felt it absolutely necessary to come forward until then. If they already knew he had the ability, Yoshida had probably assigned him to the Takatsuki case specifically so he could put it into practice.

"Sorry for not telling you sooner..." Misato apologized. He was

sure he'd be reprimanded for keeping quiet about it, but Tsujimoto merely laughed.

"C'mon, don't make that face," he insisted, waving a hand. "It's not a big deal. Just show us yer full potential in the future, all right? The retirement age nowadays is, uh...sixty-something, no? Yeh've got about another forty years left to make the most of this job. Do everything yeh can! Besides, everyone makes mistakes in their first few months," Tsujimoto said, chuckling freely. He beamed, his smile like a thousand suns shining down on Misato. "That's amazing, though. For real. Yeh're gonna be a huge help to me," he added, grinning as he started forward again.

Misato hurried to catch up. He couldn't help but let a small smile slip onto his own face. Forty years was so long that Misato couldn't even imagine what might happen in that time.

Hmm... If Tsujimoto becomes the unit manager, I might get pushed pretty hard.

Misato didn't think that was necessarily a bad thing though. With a spring in his step, he strode across the cobblestones, thinking of brighter futures.

IN the middle of the night, while the humans slept, someone trod the darkened halls of the Takatsuki mansion. His feet scraped across the tiles with each step.

Over the sound of his irregular gait, the clang of armor rang through the corridors. The warrior carried a chipped longsword in his single hand, using it as a cane as he traversed the house. Then, as if he noticed something, he came to a stop.

"...At last, I have found you, foul being. I pray you are the last of them," the warrior said, raising his sword and casting a thunderous look toward the shikigami—or, from Misato's point of view, toward *him*.

The surveillance rat continued to stare at the warrior, making no attempt to escape. The warrior darted forward, pushing off of his wounded leg. He brandished the rusting sword in the air. The shikigami's murky vision seemed to dim even further as something unidentifiable came rushing down over its head.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

A hoarse scream sent a shudder through the night air. The huge mass of inky mist split into two, then slowly dissipated into nothing. There was no telling whether it had once been a person or an animal. Meanwhile, the warrior stumbled, exhausted from the simple motion of swinging his sword. He fell to his knees in front of the rat and soon collapsed to the floor.

“Now I have finished my duty... O Yoshitsune, I beg that you take care of the lad...!” he whispered in his final moments, forcing the words from his throat. With a *clank*, his sword fell to the tiled floor.

AFTER witnessing the warrior’s demise in his dreams, Misato relayed everything that he’d seen to Tsujimoto as soon as he got to work. They called Takatsuki to corroborate the night’s events, and sure enough, Takatsuki found the broken pieces of his grandfather’s Tomoe doll in the very same corridor Misato had dreamed about.

“Apparently, Yoshitsune’s the name of the doll they gave their son. Such beautiful last words...” Tsujimoto said quietly on their way to the Takatsuki estate. It was first thing in the morning; they’d decided to check on the situation as early as possible.

“It sounded like he’d been walking around every night, hunting the evil presence scattered around the house. That presence was what was frightening Takatsuki’s son—not the doll. And remember his missing arm? Maybe he lost it in one of his battles with the spirit...” Misato hypothesized. “I couldn’t work out what the evil spirit was or where it came from based on what I saw last night, but...”

As expected, once they reached the mansion, there was no reaction from the snake to suggest that anything untoward was still inside the house.

Takatsuki wore a bitter smile when he came to greet them. “This mornin’ my boy ’fessed up to somethin’. Turns out he meddled with somebody’s grave,” he informed them.

Evidently, during the summer break, his son and a few other kids went to a nearby cemetery on a dare. While there, the boy happened to trip over something and looked back to see he’d knocked over one of the gravestones such that it sat crooked in the

ground.

In truth, the boy had gotten off quite lightly for disturbing an angry spirit. There were multiple clusters of faint presences in the house, none of them strong enough to form a consciousness. Most likely, the innumerable spirits wandering the graveyard had simply latched onto the fear and regret the boy felt and ended up following him home.

The cemetery closest to Tomoe District was at the foot of the mountains and reputed throughout the whole of Tomoe for being the most haunted. When Misato and Tsujimoto headed to the graveyard to survey it for themselves, they had to concur with that judgement. The land was brimming with the spiritual power of the mountain, giving birth to specters with eerie, unpleasant auras. They collected in the shadows of the demesne, lingering in darkness.

“Welp, I guess we can check this one off our list,” Misato hummed, scratching at the side of his head awkwardly. “Though in the end, we didn’t do anything but watch it happen.”

Tsujimoto nodded in agreement. “True. But still, we couldn’t have done it without yeh. If I’d been on the job alone, it woulda taken me forever to figure out what happened,” he said, smiling.

“Haha, I don’t think that’s true,” Misato chuckled, brushing off the compliment.

The flowers blooming on the outskirts of the graveyard swayed in a westerly wind. Misato had begun to worry that the heat would never subside, but the morning air had actually been quite crisp of late. Misato let his eyelids fall shut against the pleasant breeze.

“Well, back to the office we go, then. We’ve got a report to write up,” Tsujimoto announced before turning on his heel. Misato followed after him.

As always, their work started with paperwork and ended with even *more* paperwork.

Chapter 8: The Night of the Howling Inugami

AS fall set in, the cries of deer calling out to potential mates reverberated from deep within the mountains. Their high-pitched, echoing wails could easily be mistaken for a woman screaming. Amid the eerie, twilight glow, the sound only emphasized the desolate feel of the lonely peaks.

One evening, another shrill bellow gripped the night air.

What started as a mating call morphed into something else partway through: a terrible screech that could only be described as an animal's keening in the throes of death. Deer in the surrounding area bleated in concern, alerting each other to the danger. The drum of hooves kicking up withered undergrowth sent a panicked cacophony ringing through the mountain range.

Perhaps one of the deer had been attacked, as a few villagers in the region theorized, but the truth was that there were no natural predators on Japan's main island that would assault a fully grown stag. Most probably, it had been caught in a hunter's trap. That was what everyone told themselves, anyway, before promptly forgetting about it.

The day following the noise's occurrence, a landowner hiked up the mountain to gather some mushrooms. They shrieked at the sight that greeted them there.

The bloody husk of a buck with huge antlers lay on the ground, its eyes blown wide and its tongue lolling. It was on its back, revealing its white abdomen. Its stomach had been torn straight from the flesh, the guts messily butchered.

THROUGH the smoke of some meat sizzling on the teppan in front of him, Ryouji watched drunken customers gossip freely at the bar. He stifled a laugh as he maneuvered his spatula; only in the countryside would people talk so passionately about deer and wild boar. His ears pricked up, however, when he heard the patrons

talking about the gruesome ways in which the animals had been killed.

“Ya think a fox did it?”

“No way, man—one of the survivors was a wolf. It’s gotta be a pack of wild dogs or summin’.”

The middle-aged drunkards were carefree and easygoing as they debated the case with half-baked deductions. What Ryouji wanted to know was where it all started.

Just as he was trying to find a good time to butt into their conversation, a familiar face showed up—Misato.

Initially, the customers had looked at Misato askance and kept their distance, but after half a year he’d become one of the regulars himself. Once the others found out he worked in the Abnormal Disaster Unit, they more readily accepted his unique appearance. So long as people could find logic in it, they could grow accustomed to anything, no matter how strange that something or someone might be.

Misato often complained that people didn’t know what he was talking about when he mentioned his exact position at Town Hall. But in Tomoe, most citizens were aware of the “Spirit Hunters,” even if they couldn’t remember the unit’s official name. Many of the bar’s regulars lived in Old Tomoe and had grown up there and consequently possessed a fair amount of knowledge about the area, “abnormal disasters” included.

“Hey, Misato. You checked your wallet before comin’ in today, right?” Ryouji grinned, greeting him with the by-then-routine question as Misato sat in his habitual seat right across from Ryouji.

The first two or three times he asked, Misato had given him a serious answer, but at some point he had started brushing off the query with a “yeah, yeah, very funny.” Recently, he’d even started turning the joke back on Ryouji, claiming, “I haven’t, so make it something cheap.”

“Hmm...” Misato mumbled as he surveyed the menu. “I haven’t got much, so...some pickled cucumber, please.” That was apparently the vibe he was going for that day.

Once the two gossipy old men left the building, Ryouji brought the deer story up with Misato.

“Yeah... We’ve been talking about the same thing at work, too. We’re wondering if it might be an inugami or something. If that’s true, it’ll mean a psychic’s behind the attacks. That would be hell to

deal with,” sighed Misato, holding a glass of water in one hand and poking at his grilled rice ball and pickles with the other. “Remember that story about a bear attacking live animals a while back? Maybe the same person’s behind both incidents...”

“Hmm, maybe,” Ryouji allowed.

Inugami were a type of conjured spirit that took the form of dogs. Unlike natural specters, they were innately malicious and created specifically to cause harm.

The method to produce one was extremely cruel. A live dog was buried in soil up to its neck, and when it was about to pass out from starvation, the conjuror would place a lump of meat in front of it, just out of reach. Desperately hungry, the dog would futilely strain its neck toward the sustenance. The moment the dog’s consciousness was wholly focused on the meat, the conjuror would decapitate it, then enshrine and pray to the severed head. Thus an inugami was born.

Inugami were known for their obsessively savage behavior. If the conjuror made even the smallest mistake during one’s development, they could possibly get hurt in the process. It wasn’t a ritual that anyone with any sense would resort to.

“By the way, ain’tcha gonna order somethin’ just a *little* more expensive? C’mon, you gotta be able to afford some oolong tea,” Ryouji pointed out. “If y’ain’t got the money right now, I’ll just tack it onto your rent.”

Misato declined immediately. “I don’t need it, thank you.”

Ryouji gave him a tired look. Although Misato wasn’t pushy in the slightest, he was surprisingly stubborn. Especially as the weather turned cooler and he settled more fully into his job, he seemed a lot more assertive than he used to be.

“Of course, we don’t have any proof, but if that bear attack rumor was actually about the same inugami, then...that means it’s been in the area for quite some time now. Plus, even *before* the bear stuff, there were stories about a huge stray dog north of Tomoe. We’re lucky it hasn’t attacked any humans yet,” Misato said, his tone concerned.

“Hmm,” said Ryouji thoughtfully. “Where has it been sighted up ’til now?”

“Y’know, I’m not too sure I should be telling you all this,” Misato chuckled. “In return, would you keep an ear out for information on your end?”

“Yeah, yeah. Gotcha,” Ryouji affirmed.

“Well...it seemed to stick around the towns north of the Tomoe border for a while, 'cause all the attacks were concentrated in that area. But the deer's corpse was discovered here in Tomoe, on the southwestern side of the basin.”

In other words, the (possible) inugami had cut through Tomoe diagonally and was heading straight toward the Karino household.

“We have to catch it before the same thing happens to a human. I can't let a curse like that roam free,” Misato said in a low, serious voice.

Ryouji nodded. “You're right.”

A harsh glint flared in Misato's eyes; for one reason or another, he appeared to hold a deep fury toward curses.

As thanks for their exchange of information, Ryouji treated him to a plate of skewers.

Once Misato had satisfied his appetite, Ryouji saw him off at the bar entrance. Ryouji decided to take his break while he was at it and leaned up against the back door as he lit a cigarette. He pulled a sheet of origami paper out from his pants pocket and began to fold it, propping his cigarette between his lips as he busied his hands.

Man... So, it's finally here, huh? Still, looks like the camouflage worked pretty well up 'til now.

However, its approach meant the inugami had finally built up enough power to see right through that smoke screen. It had been a year and a half since Ryouji fled Tokyo, though. He'd had plenty of time to prepare.

But I just had to go and get attached, didn't I?

Misato's face popped into his mind. The guy was probably on his way back home by then, driving along in his cheap car.

MEANWHILE, Misato was careening around a sharp bend on the mountain road home when an animal darted in front of the car. He skidded to a halt, and a heavy impact against the bumper sent a large *thud* ringing through his ears.

“Oh no, did I run it over?!” he squawked, panicking.

Based on its size, it could've been a fox or a dog. The severity

of the curve had sent the car swerving into the opposite lane, and in a fluster, he pulled onto the shoulder of the road. After stopping the engine, he clambered out of the car. He would have had to leave the animal there if there were any vehicles ahead or behind him, but Misato was the only one around. And he would feel terrible if he just disregarded it, so he walked across the road, looking for signs of life.

“I can’t see anything. Maybe it ran away?” he speculated.

Unless they lost consciousness or died instantly, animals tended to bolt when injured. Many ended up retreating to the mountains to draw their last breath. Misato had no way of preventing that if the creature was already gone. With a sigh, he trundled back to the car.

Then he heard a growl from above.

As he looked up in shock, foul-smelling breath panted against his forehead. Obscured in the haze of the car’s high beams, a huge beast barreled down the slope toward Misato.

An inugami?!

Dazzled by the headlights, his eyes weren’t adjusting to the surrounding darkness. Immediately, he sent a flurry of hand strikes through the air, relying on his spiritual senses to pinpoint the creature’s whereabouts. The tips of his fingers collided with something, and the beast’s presence grew a little more distant.

Crap, I can’t see!

He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling around for the inugami’s ghostly aura. He could detect its spectral stench hiding in the gloom just a few steps in front of him. Drawing a deep breath, he opened his eyes again, so he didn’t lose track of its location.

Another growl resounded through the air.

I never thought the first victim would be me.

Naturally, he was surprised. If he *did* manage to deal with the beast then and there, however, perhaps he could solve the case without further risk to human life.

That would be nice, but I don’t have a single implement with me.

He didn’t have any Shintoist purification items such as *kirinusa* paper or throwing rice. He didn’t have any Esoteric Buddhist objects like the ones Yoshida used either. He wasn’t really a fighter, but it seemed he had no choice but to see the battle through alone.

He pressed his index and middle fingers together in a mudra, pouring energy into their tips to exorcise the beast. With a shout, he

turned and aimed the mudra toward the inugami, but it easily dodged the attack. Nimble kicking off the guardrail, it threw itself at Misato once more. With a swift blow from its front paws, it knocked Misato to the ground, pinning him to the asphalt. Its dirty, overgrown claws dug into his shoulder.

“Ugh—!”

His mudra came undone as he reflexively brought his arms up to ward the creature off. Fear worked its way into his heart, momentarily rusting the bars of his mental control.

POP!

The top two buttons of his shirt flew off. A mass of white sprung forth from his neck, engulfing his vision. He felt scales sliding across his collarbone.

From the other side of the snake’s slithering, pearl-white body, Misato heard the beast scream. He warily shuffled away on his backside. Once he managed to put some distance between himself and the kerfuffle, straining his eyes, he saw the serpent entwined around the inugami, the inugami wriggling and squirming as it constricted tighter and tighter.

“Shirota...” Misato said in relief. Shirota had really saved him. Usually, the snake was nothing but a pain to look after, but he could always depend on it when the situation was dire.

Misato shook himself, readjusting his limbs to try and apprehend the inugami again. There was no way he could let it escape.

“O unfaltering chains of Acala, lend thy power to me. Invoking the fundamental vow of Acala, I urge that you apprehend this fiend — *Ack!* What the...?!”

Something had suddenly rocketed toward him, hitting him square in the face. It had interrupted him right as he began to chant a binding sutra.

Misato sucked his teeth as he brushed the offending object away. As it fell, he realized it was an origami bird. It burst into flame as soon as it hit the ground, leaving only a pile of ash in its wake.

Unfortunately, his abrupt yelp had caught the snake’s attention for an instant, and its grip on the inugami weakened. Before Misato even had a chance to command it to stop, the inugami had already wriggled free and was sprinting full tilt back into the thick, shadowed undergrowth coating the mountain. It was gone.

“Damn it! Seriously, you didn’t need to check on me...” Misato sighed as he beckoned the snake back over to him.

Unlike shikigami, which were conjured beings, the snake was a freeloader in Misato’s body—and, in a way, it had become part of him. But while shikigami abided by the conjuror’s wishes, the snake had its own will.

Although Misato hadn’t *wanted* to be attacked, he was frustrated to have to watch the inugami bound away when he’d been so close to capturing the thing. At least he’d gleaned some information from the experience: he knew what the inugami looked like, as well as had some clues as to the identity of the conjuror. He’d recognized the bird that interrupted him as a Shugendo technique.

The snake inside him agreed, desperately alerting Misato to the fact that they knew the caster all too well.

“...Snakes must have a really good sense of smell,” Misato murmured.

For a few minutes, he simply stood where he was, processing everything that had just happened. Then his phone buzzed in his pocket, signaling a text message.

“Thanks for being my camouflage these past few months, man. The house and everything in it are yours. Take care.”

When the bright display winked to black due to inactivity, all Misato was left with was that one, unceremonious message. He stood there at the side of the road, staring at his blank phone screen, the swift breath of the mountain his one companion.

“**ALL** right. Let’s piece together everything we know about the recent inugami attacks,” Yoshida announced to the cramped office, his tone somber.

Sitting in the seat next to Yoshida, Haruka Tsujimoto cast his eyes down at the notes he’d written up. It was just before noon. First thing in the morning, Miyazawa had reported what had happened to him, so they were having an emergency meeting about the inugami attack he’d weathered.

There were currently ten people in the Abnormal Disaster Unit. Half of them were experts in the field, like Yoshida and Haruka, and

the other five were general administrative staff who rotated between departments.

Standing next to a portable whiteboard affixed to the blackboard, Yoshida flicked the cap of a marker off with a *pop*. “We don’t know for certain when the inugami showed up ’round these parts. It was probably feeding on animals deep in the mountains so no one would notice it, thus there’s no definitive ‘first’ incident,” he explained.

After the ambush on Miyazawa the night before, however, there was no denying what they were dealing with. Until that point, they’d heard a few accounts of strange animal deaths but couldn’t determine that an inugami was behind the killings.

“But last night, Miyazawa witnessed it for himself. Apparently, the conjuror was protecting the inugami with a charm, which unfortunately interrupted him in the middle of exorcising the beast,” Yoshida continued, exchanging a look with Miyazawa for confirmation.

Miyazawa, who was seated next to Haruka, nodded firmly.

“He also has an idea of who cast the charm. The suspect’s name is Ryouji Karino, a young man who moved here from Tokyo last spring.”

A few people exchanged glances with one another—those who knew about Miyazawa’s friendship with Ryouji Karino. Without lifting his head, Haruka stole a look at Miyazawa. Miyazawa had been at work long before their shift started and had done his best to stay calm while relating the previous night’s events.

He probably hadn’t slept. His face appeared gaunt and tired, and although he showed no signs of losing his composure, he was obviously suppressing his emotions. He exuded a stiff, serious aura, but not in the way he usually did: there was no semblance of his usual timidity left. The new Miyazawa was *much* closer to how Haruka had envisaged the Narukami Snake Eater.

“However, we can’t be certain that’s his real name. Thanks to the hard work of the Citizen Affairs Department, I managed to inquire into his certificate of residence and status in the family registry. But...this ‘Ryouji Karino’ registered an address for the first time in Tokyo just two years ago, and he doesn’t appear to be in the family registry. And not only that—we came across something strange: someone with the exact same name lived at his current home in the past,” Yoshida revealed.

Several people furrowed their brows in confusion. Haruka was the one who'd contacted the Citizens Affair Department that morning, and even he didn't know what to make of it.

"How'd that happen? You reckon it's a case of identity theft? Or do you think it was his house to begin with?" Asaka chimed in, asking the question everyone was thinking. All of them were thankful for her outspoken nature in that moment.

"We think identity theft's more likely. The original Ryouji Karino died more than ten years ago. Plus, this one has a different birthday on record," Yoshida replied. In other words, his real name was probably something entirely different. That seemed to be how Yoshida saw it, anyway.

"Karino is a Shugendo practitioner, but there's no one with that name affiliated with the Shugendo community in the Tokyo mountains. It's possible that a record of his real name exists there, but I think it's more likely he's an illegitimate monk. This is nothing like using *izuna* or *kuda-gitsune*; conjuring an inugami is seen as unholy."

The sound of pens scratching across paper filled the air as everyone jotted notes down on the reports Yoshida had handed out.

Izuna and *kuda-gitsune* were spiritual entities created by Shugendo ascetics who made an offering to the gods then prayed for several days. If done correctly, an animal servant was bestowed upon the ascetic. On the other hand, an inugami was generated by force, using the vilest of methods.

"Now, about the inugami... Karino moved to Tomoe a year and a half ago, but we didn't hear about anything out of the ordinary until this fall. As I explained earlier, it seems the beast was feeding on smaller prey to avoid drawing our attention, and over time it gradually built up power."

"Sir?" Haruka called out, tentatively holding up his right hand as he kept his gaze trained on the documents in front of him.

"Yes, Tsujimoto?"

"Could I just ask, why do yeh think he moved to such a rural area? Outsiders stand out here. Was he being pursued?" he suggested.

"Well, if we consider the stories from Tokyo at the beginning of last year, there were some rumors of an inugami conjuror being hit with a deadly curse. Their inugami was stolen, too. This event wasn't actually reported, but given the time frame, I think we can

say it's related to the case," Yoshida surmised. "Word gets around fast in this industry, even in Tokyo. When someone betrays an associate, they get blacklisted by the whole network. I wonder if he changed his name and fled here to escape punishment."

Although there were a few largish organizations in the business, such as the Narukami family and the Abnormal Disaster Unit, the world of psychics was a small one. The subset of self-employed psychics was tinier yet. It wasn't hard to turn everyone in the industry against someone, especially when word of mouth was the most trusted source of information. Occultists had their own framework of ethics and social conventions and had no tolerance for traitors.

"By the way, how did the original Ryouji Karino die? An accident? It seems strange that a ten-year-old boy died in these parts and none of us heard 'bout it. Did choosing that name benefit him in some way?" pondered Haruka, stroking his chin.

Murmurs of assent filled the room. Miyazawa, however, remained completely silent at Haruka's side, even though he was the one who knew Karino best. Allegedly, Miyazawa had been the man's "camouflage," whatever that meant. Perhaps Karino had been referring to how the snake's presence made it harder to notice the inugami. If he had moved to Tomoe in order to hide the inugami he'd stolen—and to hide from retribution for killing its conjuror—Miyazawa must have been a huge help in masking the beast's existence.

Haruka had heard the story of how Miyazawa ended up living in the Karino household from Miyazawa himself, who'd frequently spoken about how caring and warm Karino was. They seemed to be very good friends, and at the time, Haruka had been glad that Miyazawa knew someone his own age in Tomoe. For his sake, Haruka hoped that the "Ryouji Karino" Miyazawa had become so familiar with wasn't a complete fabrication.

"He drowned about ten years ago, although they never found a body. The same goes for his family: all four of 'em were seen caught in a river current before disappearing. We probably never heard about it because the accident didn't happen in Tomoe," Yoshida said solemnly. It was quite common for the authorities to declare missing persons dead when they were victims of fires or floods and no bodies were found.

"However, if he really is the same Ryouji Karino, then why

didn't he come forward and ask to have his death status retracted? That way, he could be reentered into the family registry, too," Yoshida reasoned. "But he didn't do anything. That makes it extremely likely he was lying about his identity."

Haruka nodded. He thought there could be some holes in Yoshida's hypothesis, but Yoshida had already accounted for most of them. Except, they still didn't know *how* the suspect had found out about Ryouji Karino or why he'd chosen to adopt that identity in particular. Tomoe was a long, long way from Tokyo, located deep in the mountains. Though that was probably why it was the ideal place to lie low.

"Apparently, Karino says he suffers from amnesia and has no memory of his childhood. Keep in mind this claim isn't backed up by any evidence," Yoshida added. "But let's suppose he *is* the original Ryouji Karino for a moment. Even if it's true that he has no memory of living in Tomoe, the question still comes back to why he decided to return in the first place.

"I think the more logical conclusion is that he chose the name for a reason. Maybe he used it in order to purchase that house from a third party," Yoshida conjectured. In other words, the person who originally purchased the house from the Karino family had nothing to do with them. "Does anyone else have any questions? ...If not, I'll move on to our plan of action."

Everyone nodded mutely in reply. Out of the corner of his eye, Haruka saw even Miyazawa lower his head slightly.

"We'll need to do a thorough search for the culprit, of course, but our priority is making sure no one gets hurt. Our plan will focus on securing the inugami as fast as possible."

The Abnormal Disaster Unit wasn't a police force. It wasn't their responsibility to catch the perpetrator behind the attacks but rather to prevent harm and minimize damage.

"Because it appears to prey on animals at random, setting a fail-safe trap before it strikes again could be difficult. However, now that it's gained enough power to go after humans, there's a chance that it's acting with some sort of purpose in mind. Before it can attack anyone else, I think our best bet would be to lure it out, bait multiple locations throughout the area. *Then* we'll trap it," Yoshida suggested. "If it just so happens that our suspect's name and birthday aren't fake, then I can try searching for him myself, but... I'm not sure it'll yield any results. If it *does* look like we might be

able to find him, I'll discuss it with the police."

So long as one had someone's name, birthday, and birthplace, mediums could do all sorts of things to the target: tell their fortune, curse them... Under normal circumstances, the unit would've had a huge advantage over other psychics, given all the confidential information at their disposal as part of Town Hall, but on the inugami case, they were just as clueless as any other occultist.

"Excuse me, but..." said Miyazawa, breaking his silence. All eyes swiveled toward him. "Can't we still try to conduct a divination? Both for the Ryouji I know and the one that drowned."

That morning, Miyazawa had reluctantly admitted that the empty, unobtrusive village where he and Karino lived would be a pretty good place for someone to hole up in. Even so, it was obvious Miyazawa didn't want to face the possibility that everything he knew about his friend and housemate of half a year was a lie.

"The man you know was almost certainly using an alias. He may have used his real birthday, but...even then, it's not like any of us are good enough at divination to be able to extrapolate anything from that. In my case, it'll take a whole day, including preparation time, just to do the ritual. But we have no time to waste; people's lives are in danger."

Divination and incantation called for totally different skill sets. Some psychics could do both, and with any luck, Miyazawa could as well. As the son of the Narukami head, he had probably been taught everything there was to know about both arts. Their office had the funds for just five specialists; they couldn't afford to fill one of those positions with someone whose expertise was solely in divination. Of course, the sort of divination true mediums performed was nothing like the methods street fortune-tellers employed. Real divination required much more power—and time.

"I'm really sorry, Miyazawa, but we need you to focus on catching the inugami before worrying about anything else. You're welcome to try appealing to the stars yourself, but...as I said, our job is to protect people."

Yoshida's refusal probably hurt Miyazawa, but it was extremely important to prioritize a superior's orders in the town hall workforce. As a result, all of the planning, responsibility, and decision-making fell to Yoshida. And his decision was thus: they needed Miyazawa on the frontlines.

"As I briefly mentioned, the administrative staff will cooperate

with the police to try to pinpoint the suspect's whereabouts. Please, Miyazawa..." Yoshida implored.

"...All right, I understand. Thank you," Miyazawa conceded, bowing politely.

Granted, he was still relatively inexperienced in the industry, but he was an intelligent young man, and the way he calmly heard others out was commendable. When Haruka stealthily peeked at him, his expression was level and composed. Perhaps he'd only asked for the purpose of clarification.

They couldn't request the police's direct involvement in the operation because no actual laws had been broken; in the eyes of the secular world, conjuring an inugami wasn't a crime. Sometimes, though, the police came to the Abnormal Disaster Unit with mysteries that they just couldn't unravel, hence the two departments' somewhat mutually beneficial relationship. When Yoshida needed resources that were normally only available to law enforcement, it wasn't all too hard to twist their arms so long as he bent the truth of their investigation a little.

"All right. I'll need to speak to each of you individually afterward, but I'll now announce your official roles for this case. If anyone has any questions or comments, let me know right away. Okay—Ookubo, you'll be..."

Along with the rest of the specialists, Haruka and Miyazawa were allocated to the inugami capture team. The administrative team was charged with locating Karino's whereabouts based on the information the police and the Citizen Affairs Department could provide.

At last, Haruka raised his head and took a proper look at Miyazawa. The young man's pale, delicate features were calm and collected as he wordlessly gazed down at the space in front of him.

THE night Misato was attacked, Ryouji never came home.

Misato went the whole night without sleep. When he showed up at Town Hall early the next day with huge, dark circles under his eyes, he only barely managed to recount what happened the evening before. In truth, he'd wanted to skip work and search for Ryouji, leaving no stone unturned. But he knew that would be

irrational.

Stifling his feelings of frustration and sadness all the while, he somehow pushed through his morning tasks, then made his way to the lunchroom. Usually, he took his meal back to the office to eat at his desk, but that day, he just wanted to be alone. He aimlessly wandered the building in search of a quiet place.

As Misato was about to head up the stairs toward the roof, someone from the labor union caught his arm. “Hey there! Will we be seeing you at the study-group-slash-drinking-party after work?” he asked cheerfully.

“Sorry, but *no*.” Misato answered in such a blunt, cold tone that he scarcely recognized his own voice. Both the union representative and the other employee he’d been talking to—or perhaps it was more accurate to say the employee he’d cornered—froze in place, their eyes wide. It was only then that Misato noticed the other employee was none other than Hirose, his ex-friend from high school.

“Well, y’see, you *are* a union member, and we urge all new recruits to participate...” the representative tried to persuade him nervously.

“Don’t bother. I’m extremely busy, so I’m afraid I can’t attend,” Misato said plainly. Under normal circumstances, he would have smiled politely and scraped together some ambiguous excuse to worm his way out of the gathering. But he didn’t have the mental energy to waste on platitudes just then.

The representative’s jaw clenched, the man ostensibly irritated by Misato’s cocky attitude despite being a relatively fresh recruit. “You have the right to partake in union activities,” he insisted, raising his voice as he blocked the corridor with his muscular body. “You can even ask your manager to let you leave early. Our study sessions give you the skills you need to keep working, and they’re things everyone needs to know as an employee here. Plus, you’re always holed up in your office, Miyazawa—the drinking parties would be good for you. You gotta get to know everyone.”

Misato couldn’t hold back anymore. His mouth started moving on its own before he could think his words through. “It might be my *right*, but it’s not *compulsory*, is it? What I do in my spare time is none of your business. If you want to preach about rights, how about the right to eat my lunch in *peace*? You’re wasting my break!”

“Miyazawa, this is for *your* sake—”

“Move!” he demanded with a sense of finality. “You’re in my way.”

The representative’s cheeks reddened in anger. Distantly, Misato thought he heard someone burst into laughter, but he was too preoccupied with seizing the chance to stride past the enraged union representative and rush down the hall. He ran up the stairs and flew through the door to the rooftop. Luckily, no one else was there.

He plonked down at the edge of the building and gazed up at the autumnal sky, its cotton balls of wispy clouds clustered together. Although he’d brought his lunch, he didn’t really have much of an appetite.

What are you so upset for? A self-deprecating voice in the back of his mind jeered.

Misato had tasted death at the hands of a curse once. It happened right before he graduated high school. A family member who often ostracized Misato had been the one behind the attempt. For a day and a night, he fiercely battled the curse that was trying to eat him from the inside out. In the end, he won, both consuming the curse and taking back his own life.

He would probably never forget how angry he’d been that day. The utter unfairness of the situation had left an enduring impression on his heart. So the thought of *anyone* casting a curse disgusted him. Although he’d survived, he’d been forced to abandon his home, his city, his school friends—everything. The calamity senselessly foisted upon him had ruined his life.

“But...maybe I’m being stupid for thinking he betrayed me,” he sighed, wrapping his arms around his knees.

Ryouji had just happened to find Misato on the street and invited him to live at the estate only after noticing the serpent that possessed him. That was the truth and always had been. Misato was the one who’d started getting emotional about it; that he’d been happy when Ryouji accepted the snake and then heartbroken when he discovered that Ryouji was an inugami conjuror had nothing to do with Ryouji. *He* was the one who attached sentimental value to those things. Even if “Ryouji” was just an alias, that didn’t mean Misato could forget everything the man had done for him.

Then why do I feel so...?

The soft glow of sunlight glimmered through the gaps in the thin clouds. Day by day, the wind grew frostier, but under the

warm protection of the sun, it wasn't uncomfortably cold.

After a few minutes of simply squatting there, his forehead resting on his knees, he heard the door to the rooftop open. Misato sluggishly raised his head as the hinges grated together with a metallic creak.

"...Hey, Miyazawa."

The last person he expected to see appeared from the other side of the door. It was Hirose. Misato was truly surprised to see him. And perhaps the expression on his face wasn't all too dignified, because Hirose erupted into laughter with a *pffft*. Reflecting on it, Misato realized Hirose must have been the one laughing at him just a few minutes prior, too.

"What? Why're *you* here...?" Misato blinked, forgetting his pain for a moment as he stared in shock.

Hirose sent an embarrassed, bittersweet grin his way before crouching down next to him. "That sure was a great show you put on," Hirose said, looking up at the sky.

Maybe he was also fed up with being pestered to attend union meetings.

"Guess so," Misato mumbled vaguely.

Hirose turned to face Misato properly, a kind smile on his face. "That's the first time I've ever seen you get mad."

"Ha, really?" chuckled Misato bitterly. Admittedly, he was at his wit's end, and the uncertainty of what was yet to come tortured him, but...having calmed down a little, he recognized he'd been quite harsh.

Hirose nodded. "Definitely. Back in school, you always had this smile on your face. You took things pretty seriously, but you could take a joke, too. You kept up with your studies, played some sports... Like, you were just an average, nice guy."

Past tense, huh...? noted Misato silently to himself.

He remembered working very hard to give off that exact impression in high school. People were already spreading tiresome rumors by that time, whispering about how he was "the son of an onmyoji, and an illegitimate son at that!". He'd figured it would be in his best interests to become as unassuming as possible so people wouldn't poke their noses into his business.

"...You got kinda weird near graduation, though. You were obviously sick, but you...you still had that same smile. I guess I realized that was your neutral face rather than a happy one," Hirose

said, averting his eyes.

"I'd always thought we were close. I thought you'd tell me if something was wrong. But in the end, your phone number went dead, you left home, and no one knew which college you'd gone to. I sorta got the picture that you'd had troubles at home, but since you never said anything, I wondered if you just saw me as some kinda side character. And then when you showed up here, you looked, uh...pretty *different*," he snickered, pointing a finger at Misato's hair.

Unsure how to react, Misato began playing with the end of his ponytail defensively as he changed the subject. "So why're you talking to me now...?" he asked.

That was the real question. His brain was struggling to process the fact that Hirose was actually sitting there laughing and joking with him. For the past six months, Misato had been convinced that Hirose hated him. But, judging by what Hirose had just said, the reason he'd been acting so hostilely was because he resented Misato for cutting off their friendship.

"I just never knew you could *get* that angry. It feels like...I finally saw a genuine expression on your face. For the first time ever. Not gonna lie—you were super cool when you shot down that old guy from the union. That's why I decided to follow you," he said, laughing again.

That was the last thing Misato expected Hirose to say, and he shifted uncomfortably on the spot. All he'd done was take his bad mood out on someone else; it wasn't something to be proud of. He had no idea why Hirose found it so funny.

"I dunno what set you off, but... Miyazawa, you're kinda hot when you're angry."

That time, he couldn't help but be brusque. "What's that supposed to mean?!"

What the hell's he saying? My brain's already fried.

Evidently, Misato's reaction somehow tickled Hirose, because he let loose a huge cackle. Misato stared at him, dumbfounded.

Thinking back over their school days, he recalled that Hirose had always been a positive, easygoing soul. That was why he'd been so popular. Hirose had even managed to get close to Misato in spite of his foremost efforts to feign cordial friendliness and keep his head down.

"Um, I... Sorry. Thanks, I guess. It's just, I'm too busy to..."

“Too busy to joke around, right? I get it,” Hirose said, repressing a grin. “How come?”

A deep frown settled on Misato’s face, and Hirose smiled in amusement once more.

“It’s really not a funny story,” Misato assured him, taking a deep breath. “Someone I thought was a friend...someone I owe a lot to...has been controlling an inugami. I can’t stand anyone who uses animal spirits for nefarious purposes—especially inugami. I’m in shock, to be honest. To make matters worse, both that friend and the creature have vanished into thin air. He didn’t even give me so much as an explanation. Now I have to deal with stopping the inugami and finding my friend at the same time.” Misato chewed at his bottom lip.

“In the end, I don’t know anything about him—not his real name, what happened to him...nothing. When I learned he was the inugami’s owner and that he possibly stole it from someone else, I... I didn’t feel *betrayed*, exactly, but something like that. I mean... Because he was kind to me, I started to feel like that *meant* something. But really, he...”

Did he really only think of me as his smoke screen?

Ryouji wasn’t the type of guy to kill and steal. Misato *wanted* to believe that, but it was still the case that Ryouji had never confided in him anyway. As he rambled about how upset and ashamed of himself he was, he realized that the anger and frustration filling him must have been quite similar to Hirose’s sentiments about *him* around the time they graduated. He spoke with a haggard, coarse quality to his voice at first, but upon recognizing how Hirose must have felt, it gradually mellowed out.

Hirose must have thought the same things about me.

“Mmm,” Hirose hummed noncommittally when Misato finally stopped talking. “It really hurts when someone who means a lot to you cuts you off. Rather than feeling betrayed because you trusted them, it makes you think, ‘I thought *they* trusted *me*, but I guess not.’ I can definitely relate to what you’re feeling.”

Was I really that worthless to Ryouji? Didn’t he trust me? Or maybe I’m so insignificant to him that he didn’t even think to open up to me.

Sorrow and anger built inside him, engulfing the places that used to belong to his memories with Ryouji. To be trusted by someone was to be needed by them. The more humans felt like

someone needed them, the more they needed that person in return.

“Inugami can’t be completely controlled. The more you use one, the more evil energy it absorbs. It gets bigger and bigger, until one day it devours its conjuror. Or, if the conjuror makes a mistake when giving it orders, it’ll attack them at its next opportunity to do so. That’s the sort of creature it is.”

But Misato’s anger wasn’t based on ethics or morals. He wasn’t upset at Ryouji for what he might or might not have done in a place far away from Tomoe. He was more frustrated about the fact that Ryouji was endangering himself somewhere Misato couldn’t reach. Ryouji had never told him anything, and so Misato couldn’t do anything to help.

Before he knew it, Misato was pouring his heart out to Hirose, unloading all of his grievances and concerns while cradling his knees between his arms. Hirose just let him vent, kindly *mm*-ing and *ah*-ing at regular intervals to show he was listening. Despite how far-removed Misato’s experiences were from the regular person’s reality, not once did Hirose react with disbelief or disgust.

“So, when he said you were his ‘camouflage,’ he was basically just using you to hide from the people he betrayed? That sure is nasty. Was it really a coincidence the apartment you wanted to move into was double-booked? I mean, he’d had dealings with the real estate agency you used, right?”

Hirose proposed a genuinely frightening theory. Indeed, it was possible that Ryouji had intended to use him from the very beginning.

“I don’t know. I want to believe he wouldn’t do that, but... If I want to ask directly, I need to find him first.”

Though he didn’t know what he would actually say to Ryouji if they met again. Did he want to save Ryouji? Punish him for what he’d done? Misato still didn’t know what to believe. Why hadn’t the snake ever smelled the inugami’s scent on Ryouji?

“Yeah... Well, right now, just make sure you eat some lunch and power through. We’ll have to get back to work soon,” Hirose reminded Misato as he got to his feet.

Misato checked the time to see that there were only five minutes of lunch break left; they’d spent nearly the whole hour together. Five minutes wasn’t long enough for him to shovel his by-then-cold lunch into his stomach.

He looked up at Hirose and gave him a fond smile. Thanks to

Hirose, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “Thanks for listening to me. I’ll just try to get through this,” he said, making earnest eye contact.

Hirose’s eyes widened slightly in shock before he turned in the other direction and breathed a sigh. “Sure,” he replied in a quiet voice. “See you.”

And with that, he disappeared from view, the metal door clanging shut behind him.

AFTER losing its landlord, the Karino estate was enshrouded with an empty silence.

Or—no, that was merely how Misato felt without him there. In reality, everything was the same as it had always been. Due to their contrasting schedules, Misato was used to coming home to a vacant house with only a garden of specters to greet him.

Like usual, he headed toward his room in the outbuilding.

He wasn’t in the mood to go to the bar without Ryouji there, although he didn’t have any food left in the fridge. In the end, he stuck a bento he’d bought at the convenience store in the microwave. As it began to whirr with a *ding*, he took some barley tea from the fridge.

A cacophony of insect calls and chirps rang throughout the courtyard. At some point in the past few days the croaks of frogs had faded into the distance. He hadn’t been leaving the patio door open quite so often of late; the number of cold days were increasing, and a thick fog often enveloped the area in the mornings.

“I’m all alone, huh...?” murmured Misato to himself absentmindedly.

The estate was located on high ground that overlooked fields and paddies—all of the villagers’ residences were upslope, while their farmland was nestled in the valleys below. Misato’s closest “neighbor” was at least a block away, however, and Misato only ever saw a car parked outside the other house on weekends. It was normally uninhabited.

Usually, when people dwelled by themselves, they could at least hear signs of life coming from those who resided or worked

nearby. But in Misato's case, he was wholly, truly alone. No one was going to come home to him.

The night suddenly felt far too quiet.

Ryouji had lived there by himself for a year. Had he been on the run? Had he found the abandoned house and sneaked in without knowing who owned it? Had he pushed through every night in his false life alone, forsaking even his own name for a lie?

Exhaustion and emptiness left a void in his heart where anger and pain had once festered.

BEEP BEEP!

The microwave timer interrupted his thoughts in an urgent tone, commanding him to eat before the food went cold. Misato placed his cup of barley tea on the table.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it," he muttered in response as he gazed stolidly out the window. He eventually wolfed down his lukewarm bento and started readying for a bath.

He had been planning to spend his evenings after work looking for Ryouji on his own. Yoshida and Tsujimoto had seen right through him, though, and warned him that as long as he was part of the team, it was his responsibility to ensure his actions wouldn't confound the progress of their investigation—including those off the clock. Either way, Misato was too tired that night to go anywhere.

All of a sudden, his phone started chiming beside him, an alarm he'd set a few days prior for a TV show that would be airing shortly.

Misato still hadn't bought a TV. He wasn't the sort to watch it every day, so if there was something on that he really wanted to see, he could just go to Ryouji's room. Ryouji's huge TV and Blu-ray player were the centerpiece of the messy living room.

He wasn't sure if going there would help distract him from his feelings or just intensify them. Unthinkingly, he began to head toward the main building on unsteady feet. Actually...had Ryouji taken even any of his things with him? The fact that he'd left the house and everything in it to Misato made it seem like he had no intention of ever returning.

Rather than fleeing because his cover had been blown, it feels more like...

He went away to die.

The possibility flitted across the back of his mind and sent a

shiver down his spine. He quickly shook his head. He had no solid grounds to believe that.

Naked light bulbs illuminated the northern corridor as he headed toward what had been Ryouji's bedroom. Just as he passed the bathroom and was approaching a small storage room—

A slithering sensation spread through his gut.

Within him, the white snake was reacting to something. Misato took a step closer to the storage room.

“...Is there something in here?”

The snake was clearly guiding him toward the door. He decided to indulge its interest and hooked his fingers over the door handle. He gave up on the TV show; he could hardly concentrate on anything that evening, anyway.

Misato was far more tolerant of the snake than he used to be. When he first arrived in Tomoe, he was certain he could never share the secret of its existence with anyone. But at some point, the snake had become “Misato's pet.” Misato was fortunate that Tsujimoto and Yoshida were kind enough not to treat him any differently once they learned the truth, but Ryouji had wholeheartedly embraced him and Shirota. Ryouji was the one who'd given the serpent its pet status.

“Hey, Shirota,” he said, speaking softly in the empty passageway, “I'm glad we came to this house. I'm glad Ryouji was the one who invited us here.”

Unlike a cramped college dorm, the estate was spacious such that it didn't really matter if the snake absconded from time to time. No one would see Shirota. No one apart from the landlord, anyway—and he was someone open-minded enough to let it slide. Misato had slept much better after being reassured of that fact. And, above all, it was so freeing to be able to idly chat about his daily life involving the snake in the form of small talk. Ryouji was the first person he'd ever felt he could do that with.

He pulled open the stiff sliding door, which protested with a tired-sounding creak. Two walls of the room were lined with closets, and directly ahead he could see through to a parlor. Paper screens surrounded the inner room, and darkness loomed over the space. It was about twenty-five square feet in size.

“Wait, have I...?”

Misato had never entered that part of the house before, yet he had a faint memory of the place. After staring around blankly for a

few moments, he reached a bizarre conclusion: “This is where Shiota went.”

He was looking at the room Shiota had visited while Misato was sleeping. He didn’t have full access to the snake’s vision, though; the images he could recall of the night Ryouji saw Shiota’s true form were hazy and dreamlike.

He squinted as he grabbed hold of the pull cord, and the light flickered on with a *ka-click*. Its yellowed glow permeated the room.

The snake nagged at him again.

He pulled at the closet door. “What is it? Is there something in here? Wait— Whoa!” He hadn’t even opened it fully before the snake leaped forth from the base of Misato’s neck, unraveling itself and darting toward an upper shelf in the closet.

“H-Hey, Shiota! What do you think you’re doing?!” he yelled in alarm, poking his head into the dark, musty cubby.

Can he smell something tasty in there?

The snake didn’t attack humans. Usually, it was very well behaved and peacefully slept deep within Misato. Usually, its escape meant there was a specter in the area that it intended to make its snack.

At the very back, behind a few stacks of cardboard boxes, two lumps of cloth obscured something on top of a metal trunk. Misato heaved the boxes in front onto the floor and came face-to-face with Shiota, who was entwined around the two fabric-covered masses.

“You want me to unwrap these?” Misato asked. “...Whatever they are, it looks like they were well taken care of.”

They were surprisingly heavy when he picked them up, one in each hand. He gently began to unwrap the parcels, and Shiota obediently slithered back to Misato, coiling around his shoulders like a scarf.

I can sense some lingering power. I don’t think they were sealed on purpose, but... I don’t know. Maybe someone wanted to forget them, and that in itself became a sort of spell.

When his fingers brushed the knot that tied the ends of the cloth, a feeling of deep sorrow coursed through him.

“I want to forget.”

“I want to pretend they never existed...but I can’t.”

The items’ owner could only put them out of sight, out of mind. They were precious, however—so precious, that the owner felt a need to protect them. Love and grief tinged the texture of the

carefully bound fabric, creating an unintentional, powerful seal over the objects. As Misato undid the first knot, an intense spiritual power overflowed from the gap.

“...Tomoe dolls?” he remarked in surprise. “Oh, right... The children’s grandparents must have left them here.”

Delicately, Misato ran a fingertip over the brightly colored clay, which was still as vivid as on the day it’d been painted. Mr. and Mrs. Karino had taken their two children on vacation only for all four of them to perish in dangerous waters, never to be seen again. The young couple’s elderly parents found themselves abruptly alone in the house and died a few years later, at which point the house became vacant. It must have been torturous for them to pack up their missing children and grandchildren’s belongings.

Inside the two bundles were a doll resembling Sugawara no Michizane and a doll of a young woman. One was commonly gifted to boys, and the other to girls. They’d almost certainly belonged to the original Ryouji Karino and his older sister.

But why were they still there after the estate had been sold off to someone else entirely? Misato’s brow furrowed in confusion, and he reached out to more closely inspect the dolls. That’s when he noticed.

“This one’s broken...?” he mumbled inquisitively.

A huge crack ran down little Ryouji’s doll, starting from its shoulder. The doll was on the verge of breaking completely in two, but the care with which it had been wrapped had kept the two pieces together. It seemed as if the Tomoe doll had already fulfilled its duty in shielding the boy from some sort of danger. The residual energy emitting from the broken doll was weak and fragile.

In contrast, the sister’s doll was in perfect condition without a single chink in its surface. That wasn’t because its owner was safe and healthy, however. The grief that met Misato’s fingertips when he touched it told him that much.

The snake stirred inside him, whispering, *“They’ve been crying out this entire time.”*

Misato nibbled at his bottom lip, sensing just how fervently the dolls were calling for his help. It almost hurt.

He caressed the dolls tenderly, marveling at their beauty. Newly unsealed, they screamed at Misato with a single-minded request. He could feel the plea from the boy’s doll like a fleeting

prayer, while the girl's frantically implored him, its pretty face unmoving.

"I beg of you, please save him. Please save Ryouji."

A heavy tear ran down Misato's cheek. He didn't know what or for whom he was crying but let the tears flow, nevertheless.

DRIFTING in and out of sleep, Ryouji dreamed of his past. Moments came back to him, their outlines blurring and dissipating into thin air. Then his stiff joints would complain, dragging him back to reality. Anyone's back started to ache after spending two nights in a car—even in a higher-end vehicle.

The memories that resurfaced weren't exactly his *distant* past: what appeared before him was where he'd lived until two years previous. It was on the very outskirts of the city, in a maze of murky, disorganized alleyways totally divorced from cleanliness or splendor. Amid the throngs of people using the shadows to conceal themselves from the public eye, Ryouji had contrived a rather comfortable living space for himself.

Back then, it never occurred to him that he might have to leave. When ownership of the property in Tomoe was inevitably forced on him, he wasn't particularly interested in the place. And once he actually started living at the estate, the move still felt temporary—even though the house was his family home.

A shiver wracked his body. With the engine turned off, the inside of the car was surprisingly cold by the time dawn arrived. He pulled his seat upright and turned the key in the ignition. Inugami were nocturnal. He'd been waiting for it to find him but had evidently passed out at some point.

He was parked on the side of a mountain road, next to an abandoned love hotel that had long since fallen into ruin. More than twenty-four hours had passed since he skipped out on his shift at the bar and drove to the middle of nowhere to await the inugami. He'd bought some food at a convenience store near the bar just in case it took a while but hadn't purchased enough to last him long.

He simply sat in the car, the outside of the cabin enveloped in the thick fog that visited Tomoe every fall. He chanted a silent

litany: *Come quickly.*

He'd realized all too late what a strange town Tomoe was. There was a spirit-hunting department at Town Hall, for crying out loud—whose very existence indicated just how densely distributed specters were in the area.

It had been a year and a half since he left the city on the run from the inugami.

Only one time had he fought it head on. And although he significantly weakened it, the beast merely resumed its pursuit after slowly replenishing its energy with small animals.

He'd thought it would find him faster, but fortunately he had the vast population of spirits in the Tomoe mountains disguising his presence, as well as the effect of Misato's snake. Typically, the inugami would track its way toward Ryouji as the crow flew, but finding him was proving to be an arduous task.

However, it appeared that his luck had finally run out. If the inugami attacked anyone in Tomoe with its newly accumulated power, Ryouji would have to clean up the mess.

If he'd told Misato, the guy probably would have helped him. His gentle, handsome face appeared in Ryouji's mind, his lips stretched into that absentminded, kind smile he often wore. Ryouji had purposefully sent him a cryptic message. He'd knowingly invited Misato to jump to the wrong conclusion about his mysterious behavior. The reason was simple: he just didn't want to get anyone else involved.

There were a couple possibilities as to why the inugami hadn't shown up yet. First, Misato's counterattack might have had a surprisingly strong effect on the spirit. Or, it had gone somewhere else entirely to wreak havoc. Ryouji prayed it was the former. He had an idea of what had happened between Misato and the inugami due to the precautionary protective charm he'd placed on Misato.

"But it ain't lookin' good if it tries to get revenge on him or curse him..." he murmured in concern, glaring into the chilly mist that blanketed the rubble of the old hotel.

"Come find me already. *I'll* be the one to escort you to Hell."

MISATO Miyazawa was one of Takayuki Hirose's high school

regrets. He'd considered Miyazawa his friend, and a perpetually warm and kind friend at that, yet hadn't been able to find the courage to ask what was going on when something was clearly very wrong. He was a coward, and he was oblivious for not noticing Miyazawa's pain. He rued his weakness back then even still, years later.

All that had remained of their relationship was an acrid hurt that stuck in his side like a tiny thorn. Upset that Miyazawa never confided in him, he had locked away the bittersweet memories of his final days of high school in a small corner of his mind.

Takayuki believed everyone had someone like that and had thought Miyazawa would be that person to him: someone he met, clashed, and then parted with, never to see again. He'd thought Miyazawa would always just be that little snag in his remembrance of high school.

But that very same Miyazawa was hastily walking by on the other side of the counter. Noting his work pants and red jacket, Takayuki could instantly tell he was about to leave on a job. The town hall's uniform was unnecessarily flashy, a black collar accentuating the bright red fabric of the jacket.

The hour was just approaching four in the afternoon. The mist blocking out the sun had dissipated at about midday, allowing the soft glow of autumnal sunlight to filter through the large windows before it set.

Miyazawa appeared to be searching for the car keys stored in the Property Division's office. Takayuki stared at him as he crossed right in front of the Housing Maintenance Unit, but he showed no signs of noticing Takayuki in the midst of his desperation.

"Hey, Miyazawa," Takayuki called out, sensing that it was pointless trying to catch his attention nonverbally.

Miyazawa's eyes widened, startled, as he froze on the spot. "A-Ack! Hirose!" he stuttered. His mind was plainly focused elsewhere, but even so, it was quite the rude greeting. "Sorry... I was thinking about something. Was it obvious?" He backtracked, laughing awkwardly in an attempt to downplay his true feelings.

Takayuki knew that look well; it was Miyazawa's trademark smile. Since he'd learned that the expression was nothing more than a shield to keep people at arm's length, it stung to be on the receiving end.

"Is it related to what we talked about yesterday?" Takayuki

asked, standing up from his chair to lean on the counter separating them. Although the room was fitted with counters to deal with clients, few citizens ever had to visit that floor. And with the majority of employees out working in the field, the office was almost deserted.

Miyazawa averted his gaze in embarrassment, then nodded. He twirled the end of his slicked-back ponytail in thought before daring to look at Takayuki again. “Thanks for yesterday. I actually think I have a hope of finding him now, so I was just about to go out looking,” he said.

Miyazawa had soft features that hinted at a good upbringing. He often sported that same affable grin but had a range of other expressions. He didn’t seem like the type to hide something—which was why the revelation to the contrary had come as such a shock to Takayuki. When they first met again, his mind incredulously rejected Miyazawa’s new image. Upon spying his long hair and observing how well the androgynous style suited him, Takayuki had struggled to believe he was the same person.

“Really? That’s great,” Takayuki replied.

Fighting spirit burned behind Miyazawa’s irises. He radiated a determination to track down the friend that had left him behind.

Something like jealousy pulled at Takayuki’s heartstrings. It felt like the residual thorn from high school was sinking even deeper into his skin. Takayuki wasn’t entirely sure whom he was jealous of. Did he envy Miyazawa for being able to chase after someone with such unwavering confidence? Or was he jealous of the friend for how much Miyazawa cared?

“Can I ask you something?” Takayuki interjected.

On their first day at work, Takayuki hadn’t known how to act and ended up thoroughly ignoring Miyazawa. The next time they’d crossed paths, Miyazawa unquestionably tried to keep a distance from him. And while Takayuki understood his predicament was the karmic result of his past behavior, he couldn’t think of a way to make amends. He feared that trying to delve beyond Miyazawa’s smiling mask would be wasted effort.

The day before, when he saw that mask fracture and fall, he chased after Miyazawa in a spur-of-the-moment decision. The Miyazawa he knew would have avoided the situation by politely laughing and equivocating, not flat-out refused someone and pushed past them. Takayuki had been captivated by the striking

aura of his blatant anger.

“Back in high school...if I had asked you what happened, before we graduated, do you think things would have been different?” Takayuki asked.

After a moment's confusion, Miyazawa's face went completely blank. Without the guise of a vague smile, his features were overtaken by a cold, enchanting beauty. His eyes were as black as a moonless night, giving the impression he was from another world altogether. “Hmm... Sorry, but I'm not sure. When it first happened, I couldn't pay attention to anyone but myself. I know it sounds bad, but I didn't even think of you.”

“Sounds about right. I should've known,” Takayuki agreed.

In the end, he didn't know what exactly had transpired back then. But Takayuki *had* discerned how desperate Miyazawa was—so much so that he seemed to have given up on himself. Even if Takayuki hadn't known the reason for it, he'd been able to tell that the smiles Miyazawa gave him were bricks in a huge, impenetrable wall. Should he have tried to climb it? Should he have asked why? The same doubts had been running in circles in his head ever since.

If he had extended a hand to Miyazawa, would he have been able to save his friend?

When they met again years later, Takayuki came to realize that such a question was nothing more than arrogance. Miyazawa possessed unthinkable powers and lived a life of wonder and peculiarity without a second thought. Takayuki had been reminded of his insignificance to Miyazawa all over again.

It wasn't a case of saving him. I just wanted to know if I could make more of an impression on him. I didn't regret not saying anything for his sake—but for my own.

He'd been deceiving himself. He used fear and regret as plausible excuses for his actions and pinned the blame on other people rather than taking responsibility.

“...But I really am glad we can talk normally again, just like we used to. I managed to get a better hold on things after you heard me out yesterday.” Miyazawa smiled—not out of politeness, but a genuine, gentle smile.

“Lies. You were already dead set on chasing after him,” Takayuki said bashfully with a strained grin.

Miyazawa was nothing like Takayuki. When he had a friend in need, he was immediately willing to do all he could to go after him.

He wasn't worried about feeling wanted or scared of being rejected. Meanwhile, all Takayuki could do was listen—literally. Miyazawa had been wholly resolved to find his friend from the very beginning, even if that friend *had* deceived, used, and deserted him.

"I'm glad I got to talk to you again, too. Anyway, sorry for bothering you while you're busy. See you later," Takayuki said with a casual wave of his hand.

Miyazawa nodded and gave a light wave in return. He walked over to the far wall and unhooked a set of car keys hanging there before signing his name on the nearby register and whiteboard. "All right. I'm off," Miyazawa announced, his jaw set, and he turned away with a smile. His silky black hair swayed at his waist as he moved.

"Bye," Takayuki said simply. His gaze trailed after Miyazawa, eventually coming to rest on the empty space the man left in his wake.

CONJURING an inugami was evil. The caster performed a horrifying ritual on the spirit of an innocent dog to transform it into a hungry demon. In days long gone by, people used inugami for extortion. There were numerous ways to control animal spirits, but unlike borrowing the gods' powers to utilize fox or tanuki spirits, conjuring an inugami was wholly dependent on the caster themselves, far removed from any deity. It was one of the wickedest, unholyest rites.

In the middle of an abandoned parking lot, Ryouji tucked his sunglasses into the breast pocket of his military jacket and gripped a *khakkhara* staff tight. A savage odor wafted through the twilight air. Ryouji looked upwind, straining his eyes as he peered into the distance. Then he saw it—a trail of ghostly smoke lingering in the sky, revealing the inugami's location.

"Finally decided to show up, huh? I almost died of boredom waitin' here," he sneered.

Ryouji didn't need clairvoyance to sense spiritual presences. All he had to do was take his sunglasses off, and he saw both the world of the living and the world of the dead simultaneously—whether he wanted to or not. Although people called them "tengu

eyes” out of fear and contempt, Ryouji’s eyes were part of his identity.

He was an orphan with no memories, the adopted child of a tengu.

Ryouji had been an Outsider for as long as he could remember—ever since the day an illegitimate monk calling himself a tengu took him in. His adoptive father had been a strange, suspicious-looking man—much like Ryouji was. His father was often away from home and eventually, by the time Ryouji was around fifteen or sixteen, stopped coming back altogether. Perhaps he’d died in a ditch somewhere; that was what everyone used to say. Ryouji thought that was probably the case, too.

After losing his sole caregiver, Ryouji found support with vagrant psychics in similar situations to his own, earning just enough money to face life one day at a time. Among those psychics was an inugami conjuror.

Rumor had it that when an inugami’s owner perished, it would haunt their child instead. The man had never married and consequently had no worries about what might happen after he died. However, one precious piece of information completely changed that outlook. Once, years previous, he’d indulged in a short-lived fling with a woman who ended up giving birth to a child without his knowledge. When the man found out, all the color drained from his face. The shadow of death was already upon him.

GRRRRR...

A low growl echoed from the shadows of the derelict hotel. The inugami was wary of Ryouji. Apparently it remembered how he’d left it on the verge of death the last time they fought.

Inugami were controlled by the casters who made them, although there was no guarantee they would always submit to their creators. Considering the method of conjuration, that was to be expected—its owner had trapped, starved, and ultimately decapitated it. While it responded to its owner’s commands, it also had its own agenda: to kill them. Thus, little by little, it ate away at the conjuror’s life force.

In his final moments, the inugami’s conjuror begged Ryouji for help, a far cry from the easygoing, detached man Ryouji had once known. If the inugami were to haunt the child, who had never even met his father, he wouldn’t stand a chance against it. The man had pleaded with Ryouji to seal the beast away before that could

happen.

Sealing an inugami was by no means easy. And diverting one from the bloodline it had already latched onto was frighteningly difficult; hardly anyone knew how to go about such an undertaking. Because the child would inherit its ownership as soon as the original host died, any endeavor to exorcise or harm it would have an effect on the new host's life force, too.

Before, when Ryouji left it at death's door and fled, its initial owner was still alive.

Not anymore.

"Lookie here," he teased. "Don'tcha want your body back?"

He pulled a dog's skull from his pocket and swung it in the air, one-handed. The inugami's growls intensified. The creature's first owner had used the skull as a means to control it. Not only did the inugami recognize the skull as its own, but it also equated the cranium with the supernatural chains that bound it. Using the skull, Ryouji could essentially "redo" the ritual and transfer dominion over the inugami to himself.

The beast leaped from the shadows of the ruins, diving toward its own skull, marking the beginning of a mighty battle under the night sky.

Ryouji stuffed its cranium back into his pocket and swung the khakkhara at the inugami. A jingling noise resounded in the air as the golden rings attached to it clanged against one another. He would have to take care not to strike the creature too hard. Its current host was an entirely ordinary person with no ties to the spirit world.

Through research, Ryouji had discovered that he could make the inugami his by wrapping the dog's skull in talismans, burying it in the earth, and waiting until it had been stepped over ten million times.

Ten million times.

If he could have interred it beneath a train turnstile in the middle of Tokyo, the number would've been reached in no time. In the countryside, however, the places where he could dig in exposed soil weren't exactly bustling with people. He'd managed to bury it in the busiest park in town, but in the end, the foot traffic was even lower than anticipated, and it had taken until the following summer for his plan to finally come together.

In all honesty, he'd doubted he would pull it off before the

inugami sniffed him out. By spring, the creature had already found its way to Hiroshima prefecture. Then his savior had arrived in the form of a snake spirit named “Shirota.”

All he had to do was perform an incantation on the feral inugami in front of him. It flung itself at Ryouji, and he repelled the creature by hitting it in the snout. He quickly distanced himself before thrusting his khakkhara into a crack in the asphalt. Wagging the skull in the air, he enticed the inugami toward him once more.

Ryouji knew nothing about his real parents, the ones who’d named him—not even what they looked like.

He went through life floating from place to place like driftwood, trading the favors he received to the next person he met. A complete stranger had saved him, so it was only fair that he someday lay down his life for someone else. He didn’t have any close enough friends to grieve that inevitability.

His absent adoptive father had bought the Karino estate before disappearing for good, leaving it to Ryouji. Ryouji had no idea what the man had been thinking. He viewed the property as a temporary shelter, nothing more, even after he’d been informed that it was his original home. He had no memories of the place, and seeing it brought nothing back. He’d never intended to live there for long. The Ryouji Karino who’d once resided in that house was long dead.

But there’s one thing that bugs me...

An image flashed through his mind—long, shiny black hair pulled back into a neat ponytail, pearl-grey scales peeking over the top of a slender shoulder blade.

If he had a regret, it would be that he hadn’t gotten to stay with the new occupant of the house a little longer. Ryouji wished they could have talked more. They both shared heavy destinies and the same solitude. Ryouji had grown up not knowing himself, and Misato had grown up knowing neglect. There might be a lot of differences in their immediate circumstances, but they both looked up at the same distant sky.

“...That guy’s naming sense is somethin’ else, though.” He couldn’t help but chuckle, recalling the young, beautiful onmyoji and the snake spirit that possessed him. The serpent was so captivating and strong, and yet its owner had decided on the most basic name he could muster. Since Misato had a beautiful appearance *and* name, the snake deserved a more befitting title, too.

Poor thing.

Ryouji wavered for a moment as he mourned the loss of those happy days, and the inugami regarded him curiously. It emitted a dreadful stench, drool oozing from its bared fangs as it scraped at the asphalt with a muddied front paw. Ryouji stared back at it.

“You wanna feed on my life? Then come get it,” he promised. The words came out calmer than he expected.

He would supplant the current host as the inugami’s master and imprison it in his own body. Then engage in a fight to the death as the beast strove to escape. Who would waste away first? The creature or Ryouji?

Consume or be consumed.

Even if the inugami won and Ryouji died, he had no relatives for the beast to harry in turn; his death meant the spirit would finally perish. If—and that was a big *if*—Ryouji claimed victory, it would be a miraculous stroke of luck. He sincerely doubted he had it in him.

“Hey...Misato. I never got to ask...what’d that snake taste like?” The question dissolved into the night air along with the steam of his breath. Was this how Misato had felt when he found himself in a similar battle between life and death?

Suddenly, the sound of shoes scraping against grit arose from behind him. A voice rang out, as clear as day.

“It tasted awful, obviously. Idiot.”

THE inugami retreated a step out of caution. Ryouji’s silvery green eyes opened wide in shock.

“All that is pure shall not be corrupted. Exorcise, and purify. O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind—*kyuu kyuu nyo ritsu ryou!*” Misato’s mantra pierced the silence, his tone dignified and powerful.

He pointed a mudra toward the beast, and a loud *clap* shivered through the space around them. Power emanated from his outstretched fingers in shockwaves, pulsing through the surroundings with each surge. The inugami went flying, its filthy body hurtling through the air until it crashed into the overgrowth wreathing the parking lot with a huge *thud*.

“Wh-Why is he...?” Ryouji croaked. A divine wind as cold as

moonlight tousled his hair from behind, swirling the beastly stink away. “Misato, wait! *Don’t hurt it!*” Ryouji yelled, scrambling to block Misato’s attack.

“Why not?” he asked in a low voice as he leisurely strolled to Ryouji’s side. His gaze was frigid as he studied Ryouji, just like the air coiled around him. His elegant features were impassive, graced with an icy beauty. He possessed a slightly different aura than usual, and it took Ryouji’s breath away.

“It’ll harm its current host—a totally normal civilian who has no idea about *any* of this.”

“So now what? Make it latch onto you instead? Are you serious?” Misato said as he arranged his fingers into a binding mudra, drawing on Acala’s power. It seemed he had no intention of backing down.

“I’ve got no choice! An old friend begged me to get rid of it. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,” Ryouji growled, snatching at Misato’s wrists and picking apart his fingers.

Misato quickly slapped him away. “So, this ‘old friend’ of yours... You’re willing to come under suspicion of killing your own associates and even shoulder a cursed spirit for him? He must’ve been pretty special to you,” Misato spat, his mouth twisting. “Or... was he just another stranger?”

“Yeah? And what the hell’s your problem with that? Jerk,” Ryouji barked. “It was his dyin’ wish, and I owed him. It doesn’t matter if I don’t know the guy I’m protectin’ right now; I’m payin’ back a favor. That’s enough for me.”

Misato pushed past him. “Whatever,” he muttered flatly. “I’m not trying to say your way of life’s wrong. But I don’t know what this inugami’s owner looks like or even what his name is. On the other hand, *you* gave me somewhere to live, cooked me noodles when I was too exhausted to eat...remember? Ryouji...”

He looked back at Ryouji over his shoulder. His jet-black eyes reflected the mysterious glow of the moon, piercing Ryouji with one look. His body went rigid. It was as though the person gazing at Ryouji wasn’t Misato at all—but the cold, fierce Narukami Snake Eater.

“I don’t want to be with someone else. I don’t want to save someone else. I don’t want to be there for someone whose face I don’t even know. I’m not saying it doesn’t *matter* what happens to them, but...” Misato looked straight at him. “There are people who

need you. There are people who want you to be happy—like me, and your family.”

EARLIER that morning, Misato had departed for work with the Tomoe dolls in tow. Their existence constituted a major breakthrough in his search: if the owner of the Karino estate was indeed the same Ryouji as the one from all those years past, Misato could look up his details on record at the town hall. And if he could determine Ryouji’s location using a divination ritual, the investigation would progress more quickly than if they lured the inugami with bait. At last he had a solid justification for prioritizing going after Ryouji in a professional capacity.

Even so, once the divination, strategy meetings, and paperwork were all dealt with, it would be nighing evening by the time they could leave the office.

Divination could only give them fuzzy, abstract clues to Ryouji’s whereabouts. It wasn’t as easy or accurate as triangulating someone’s location using a tracker on their phone. The unit decided on a few potential spots and split into two groups, planning to start with the areas closest to the office. Yoshida would lead one team, and Misato was chosen to head the other. The designation had honestly rather shocked him.

Please let him be in one of mine.

Misato repeated the thought in his mind like a prayer as he mapped out his squad’s route.

“Just so you know, I’m not giving you so much authority just because your friend’s involved in the case,” Yoshida added, after detailing all the different tasks he was entrusting Misato with. “We still don’t know what ‘Ryouji’ actually did, after all. I’m relying on your abilities, so I’ll leave any decisions up to you during the operation, but please heed Tsujimoto and Ookubo’s instructions if you encounter the inugami or Ryouji Karino himself. Got it?”

“Got it,” Misato said, nodding firmly. Internally, the pressure of such responsibility was a heavy weight—especially because Yoshida had specifically warned Misato not to let personal feelings impact his judgement. Nonetheless, he wasn’t going to relinquish his charge to anyone.

Misato briefed his colleagues just before advancing on the weedy hotel parking lot. Tsujimoto would be nearby for logistical support, and Ookubo would assist by way of his expert talents with Shinto implements. On the third stop in their search, the snake had traced the inugami's stench.

He didn't begrudge the ability anymore. He wouldn't hesitate to use every resource he had.

They parked the car a short distance from the hotel and approached the site under the cover of a protective incantation that masked their presence. There were no streetlights in the vicinity, but fortunately the western half-moon illuminated the clear, fall night sky.

It would take everything they had to corner the inugami. They couldn't stop, even if Ryouji came to harm. That had been emphasized during the strategy meeting. Their mission was to immobilize the creature above all else. Misato had been preparing for the purification ritual since that morning, endlessly reiterating a simple incantation to hone his spirit.

When he finally faced the inugami, he unleashed that unadulterated energy on the creature without mercy.

It turned out that the inugami didn't belong to Ryouji, who desperately pleaded for him to stop. But Misato had no intention of reneging on the strategy they'd devised.

Idiot.

That was the first word that came to mind when Misato grasped the truth of Ryouji's situation at long last.

"Ryouji. Pass me that skull," Misato said, gesturing toward the dog skull in his hand.

"Nuh-uh," Ryouji scowled, shaking his head. "What good'll that do? I'm the only one who can get control over it. I ain't gonna just hand it over to ya and undo all the hard work I put into this ritual. Plus—worst-case scenario—this guy'll run straight off to wherever its current host lives."

The issue could no longer be settled by merely driving the creature away from Tomoe. Misato was well aware of that fact. "Don't worry," he assured Ryouji. "That thing's going nowhere. Ookubo put up a barrier around the whole parking lot."

A Shinto-style barrier adorned with plaited paper streamers encompassed the entire hotel. There was no chance of the inugami escaping.

At some point during their quarrel, a ghostly miasma began to swell from the other side of the thicket.

“Damn it!” Ryouji snapped with a *tch*. It was possible the beast was drawing energy from the host’s lifespan in order to heal. “That’s enough. Don’t you dare interfere with this!” he commanded, glaring at Misato, a silvery glint to his mystical eyes.

Misato glared right back at him.

Seriously, he’s got to be an idiot. The thought flashed through Misato’s mind again. Who on earth would sacrifice their life just for a favor?

The two of them might have different outlooks and values, but Misato couldn’t just stand by and watch Ryouji forsake himself. “I don’t care what you say. I *won’t* let that thing have you,” Misato declared in a low voice. Those were his true feelings. If Ryouji caused the creature to haunt himself, it would completely consume him one day. Misato wouldn’t let that happen.

Ryouji’s green and silver eyes were usually hidden behind sunglasses, but right then Misato could see them become perfectly circular in shock.

The inugami abruptly charged toward them from the dusky overgrowth, howling wildly as it closed in.

Misato didn’t waste a moment. Interlocking his fingers, he chanted the Binding Sutra of Acala, an incantation to ensnare evil spirits. “Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen. O unfaltering chains of Acala, lend thy power to me. With the fundamental vow of Acala, I urge that you apprehend this fiend!” The incantation’s power swept down on the inugami again and again, layering over it.

But Ryouji chanted the Mantra of Śakra at the same time, trying to drown out Misato’s voice with his own. “*Namah samanta-buddhanam indraya svaha!*” Sparks flew toward Misato with a crackle. With Misato’s incantation interrupted, Ryouji dashed forward.

“What the...?! Why’re you being so stubborn, you fool?!” Misato yelled in exasperation, following hot on Ryouji’s heels.

The inugami shook itself free from Misato’s half-complete binding spell and lunged toward Ryouji. Ryouji waved the skull at it, getting ready to recite the incantation that would transfer its ownership to him. Drool flying from its tongue, the beast’s maw gaped open as it threw itself at Ryouji from above. He squared

himself and set his hands firmly on his hips as he intoned, “*Om kurukulle gati gahaniye—*”

Misato reached for him. He didn’t care if Ryouji shook him off. So long as Ryouji survived, he could reprimand Misato with whatever punishment he saw fit. Clinging to that thought, Misato directed a silent appeal to his hidden companion.

I know our plan got a bit messed up along the way, but now’s the time! Go for it! I accept you as part of my powers...!

It didn’t matter that it had been forced on him. *It* was one of Misato’s strengths, and he’d come to understand that he could use it to safeguard and defend his new life in Tomoe.

With a *whoosh*, something white slithered through the treetops, rustling the leaves as it went. A serpent appeared behind the inugami, rearing its head in interest. At its largest size, it was in predator mode.

It was extremely difficult to seal or to destroy an inugami. Even if they captured it, there was no way to sever the connection to its host.

Then why not just consume the whole thing?

Ever since the entire affair began, Misato had intended to restrain the inugami and feed it to the snake. Attempts to exorcise the creature would hurt it, prompting it to undergo a healing process—and thus sap away the host’s vitality. But if it didn’t have any time to regain its strength before being devoured, the host would go unscathed. The inugami would have no opportunity to drain their life force.

The snake darted toward it with a speed unbecoming of its size. Ryouji, the inugami, and the snake were all headed to the same point in the parking lot. It was just a matter of who got there first.

You need to make it in time. Please.

Suddenly, red fabric fluttered in the dim moonlight.

The figure of an aristocrat was standing behind Ryouji, clad in splendid ceremonial court dress. Right next to the courtier stood a woman wearing the same brilliant scarlet cloth albeit in the form of a bridal robe and kimono.

Tomoe dolls...?

They were the two festival dolls Misato had found begging for his help at the Karino estate.

Misato seized Ryouji’s wrist and forcibly yanked him back.

Ryouji stumbled clumsily, eventually falling into Misato's arms.

The festival dolls were given to children to celebrate their birth as well as impart health throughout their development. The dolls assumed the role of protective gods, watching over the child as they aged, and even bore harm on their behalf if they were ever in danger.

The woman embraced the aristocrat as if to support him in his gravely injured state.

"We'll look after this soul. Do what you must," echoed a man's voice in Misato's head. He noticed that the skull Ryouji had been holding was in the handsome aristocrat's hand.

The man was absorbing the inugami's essence.

"Shirota, come on!" Misato yelled.

The white serpent opened its jaw wide. The apparitions of the woman and courtier faded, leaving the spirits' true forms in their wake—a dog's skull and two dolls—and the snake's mouth drew ever closer to them as they momentarily floated in the air.

CHOMP.

The snake nimbly caught all three objects in its gullet before spiraling to a stop and closing its mouth. Slowly, a lump traveled down its throat and toward its stomach. Misato tightly gripped Ryouji's shoulders as he watched the inugami vanish, making certain of the beast's defeat.

A breath of autumnal air enveloped them. A pine cricket began to chirp, as if the deathly silence had reminded it of its purpose. As the moon gradually set behind the trees, the scenery around them sank further into night. In the forefront of their shadowed vision, the snake's pearly scales reflected the remainder of the moonlight leaching through the branches. Misato could feel the muscular shoulders nestled in his arms begin to quiver.

"Wh—?" stuttered Ryouji in a small voice.

"Hm?" The corners of Misato's eyebrows lifted as he looked down. Then, at that same proximity, Ryouji released a terrific scream.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST DO?! IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?! WHAT THE HECK?!"

Misato clapped his hands over his ringing ears, trying to shield himself from the head-splitting volume of Ryouji's voice. Without Misato's hold to steady him, Ryouji collapsed to his knees, his palms spread out on the ground beneath him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Misato panicked, realizing he'd just dropped the guy on accident. "Do you have a problem with how we dealt with it?"

For the most part, things had gone according to plan, although Misato had never imagined the Tomoe dolls would join in.

An awkward silence drew out between them.

LED lights shattered the encroaching dark.

"Miyazawa! What happen—? Whoa! That thing's *huge*...!" exclaimed Tsujimoto in admiration as he came running with a flashlight in hand. He shone it at the white serpent, who was still mid-digestion. Probably, he'd made his way over after noticing the inugami's presence disappear. Misato was reminded of just how unshakable Tsujimoto was.

"...Is he...okay?" Tsujimoto asked, worriedly glancing at Ryouji. Ryouji was crouched on the ground, clutching his head.

"Umm..." Misato replied uncertainly, peering at Ryouji in confusion. He thought he'd managed to avoid doing anything too distressing, but Ryouji was clearly in shock. While Misato was scrambling for an answer to Tsujimoto's question, a pathetic whine interrupted him from below.

"I... I mean... I knew about this dude's pet, yeah? I knew big ol' Shirota here was super powerful, but...THAT'S GOTTA BE CHEATIN', MAN! THAT'S FREAKIN' OVERKILL! I went through so much to get this far, but you just waltz up and..." Ryouji lamented.

Tsujimoto burst into a cackle of laughter.

"Not my problem," Misato huffed, turning his chin up indignantly.

The snake bellied back toward Misato. It seemed to have safely consumed and digested the inugami. The serpent shrank, growing smaller and smaller as it approached, until it melted under Misato's skin.

In the moonless, cloudless sky, a multitude of stars glittered against the void. Far from any urban areas, there was no light pollution to obscure the magnificent sea of celestial bodies. Misato looked at them, and they were so far away that his meager outstretched hand couldn't possibly reach across the expanse.

And yet, I'm right here, standing on a planet of my own.

There was no significance to Misato existing in that time and place. Destiny hadn't led him there. The friend at his feet and his colleague crying in laughter—the fact that they'd met at all was no

miracle. There was no reason for it.

But that's exactly what makes them special.

Misato was so extremely grateful that he'd been able to find such friends by sheer coincidence. The road he'd taken was only one among thousands of possibilities, and he wanted to do all he could to protect it.

The starry sky was unreachable, and the planet he stood on was shrouded in darkness. Misato was caught in the space between life and death, but even so, the morning would always come. There was always a reprieve from even the blackest night. He went to work, unriddled supernatural mysteries, fretted about this and that, laughed, and even happened upon some happiness on occasion. He slept and ate, and daily life continued as normal.

Nothing stayed the same forever. In the grand scheme of things, all that came to pass was meaningless.

Misato knew that he would be able to get through, even if it took a lot of effort.

"Let's go home, Ryouji. Back to *our* home."

"...It's *my* house, though. You're just a lodger with no money," whispered Ryouji with a pout on his lips.

Misato laughed.

Another Day: Ryouji's Persimmon Obsession

“HEY, Misato. What makes you think of fall?” asked Ryouji out of nowhere.

It was early afternoon on a weekend. Misato had nothing in particular to do (apart from chores) and was casually reading a small paperback he held in one hand. Ryouji had shown up at his door with equally little to do.

“Umm... When the leaves turn red, I guess? How come?” he answered in confusion, glancing up from his copy of an *otogi-zoshi* fairy tale.

Looking at Ryouji, Misato realized something odd about the thuggish monk's outfit. He usually wore obnoxious, expensive-looking street fashion, but that day, his clothes appeared rather plain in comparison. More specifically, they actually fit him for once, rather than hung off his frame in a baggy pool of fabric. Misato had a bad feeling.

“Bzzzt! Wrong!” Ryouji exclaimed. “You shoulda said persimmons! That's the only right answer!”

Misato was suddenly reminded of the story “The Crab and the Monkey”—a strange fable in which a monkey offers a crab a persimmon seed, then ends up killing the crab with the fruit it grows. Evidently, his mind was preoccupied with the folktale he'd been reading.

“Right... What makes you say that?” Misato raised an eyebrow. Lots of crops were harvested in fall; he could have chosen any number of seasonal foodstuffs. There was nothing special about persimmons.

“Cause we've got 'em in our garden!” Ryouji announced gleefully. As was typical of old farmhouses in the countryside, there was a small grove of persimmon trees at the back of the estate, its fruit dyed vermilion.

Upon noticing that Ryouji wielded a tree pruner instead of his usual khakkhara, Misato felt it would be pointless to ask what he was getting at. Basically, Ryouji was telling him to help pick them.

The change in clothing wasn't so much a matter of taste but practicality.

"Have you always liked persimmons so much? Besides, aren't the ones out back way too bitter to eat?" Misato recalled, reluctantly closing his book and sitting up. He knew his excuses wouldn't suffice but asked anyway.

"Yup! But I like dried persimmons, so..." Ryouji shrugged.

He's going to make them himself?

Misato should've known. Ryouji was twenty-four years old—as confirmed by their recent discovery—and he was both a freelance monk and a bartender. He was actually quite a skilled hiker as well; he seemed to be an expert at fending for himself in the wild and possessed a magnitude of knowledge concerning hunting and gathering.

Misato sighed. "Can't you just do it yourself? What would I even do to help?"

"Those trees are pretty tall, y'know? Plus, they're in an awkward spot, so the fruit ain't that easy to pick. I'll climb up there and cut them off the branches. You can catch 'em for me."

"You've got to be kidding," groaned Misato. Events were playing out far too similarly to those in "The Crab and the Monkey" for his liking. What if he died from a persimmon to the head, too?

Rather than fearing Ryouji, however, he simply had no faith in his own hand-eye coordination.

"What about your rent?" asked Ryouji, interrupting Misato's hesitant silence in a serious tone of voice.

"What about it? I'm completely up to date!"

"If you were 'up to date,' you would be payin' each month's rent in advance. *You're* just scrapin' by," Ryouji said with a point of his finger.

Misato sighed again. He was consistently one month behind and just couldn't catch up no matter how hard he tried to save. Without a legitimate comeback, he reluctantly got to his feet.

AT the rear of the Karino estate were a small, overgrown garden and a pond whose water originated in the mountains looming directly behind it. Partway up the steep slope, a diminutive grove

boasted a variety of trees, persimmon included. In the absence of proper maintenance, the branches had free reign, thrusting wildly into the air. The combination of mountainous location and tall trees meant that the fruit was far, far out of reach.

Misato gazed up at the trees, desperately searching for a safe, sturdy place to stand.

How the hell am I going to catch them?

Ryouji, on the other hand, nimbly climbed up onto a thick bough and stretched the pruner toward the persimmons on an upper limb.

“Don’t people usually say it’s dangerous to climb persimmon trees? The branches are too fragile or something,” Misato cautioned.

“Sorta. Vertically, they splinter easily. But there’s a method to climbing ’em,” Ryouji explained. “Aight, here comes the first one!” The sound of a branch snapping accompanied his warning.

Nothing fell though. Instead, a spray of foliage hung from the end of Ryouji’s pruner, which was apparently equipped with the function to hold onto whatever it lopped off.

Where’d he get that thing? And when?

“Aaaand pass!”

Ryouji swung a persimmon directly over Misato’s head, then let go. Misato flailed, frantically throwing out his arms to catch the flash of orange fruit. It fell heavily into his palms. It wasn’t fully ripe yet, but that was preferable since Ryouji was planning on drying them. In fact, if they *were* ripe, Misato might accidentally crush them to a pulp just by handling them.

“Nice catch. Aight, get ready for the next one.”

Misato had to ask Ryouji to slow down as more and more persimmons dropped into his hands. He tucked each addition to their collection into a plastic bag. Ryouji told him to leave some of the twig attached; they’d use it to tie the fruits to a piece of twine later.

Ryouji was handy with the pruner, easily severing each persimmon from the tree, and seemed to be having a lot of fun. Misato wished Ryouji would consider *his* perspective a little more: his neck was beginning to ache from looking up so much.

“Hey, could we stop soon? My neck’s killing me,” he complained.

Picking fruit was enjoyable work. The fact that little brain

power was required made it pleasantly meditative. Nonetheless, doing nothing but catch persimmon after persimmon rapidly took its toll on the body.

“Huh? What’re you sayin’? There are still tons left.” Ryouji wrinkled his nose.

“*Please?* Surely we’ve got enough by now. You’ll be the only one eating them, after all,” Misato pointed out. They already had two full bags. Persimmons were sweet, and there was no way he’d be able to stomach them.

Ryouji grinned. “They’re gonna be *dried* persimmons, genius. If you freeze ’em, they last forever. I’ll have an endless supply!”

Ryouji did have quite the sweet tooth. But, then again, who was ultimately going to have to peel and string up all those persimmons? He would make Misato help out yet again, no doubt. Misato could probably choke down one a day at most, so it felt like wasted effort to him. Sure, it might be punishment for getting behind on rent, but Ryouji was unlikely to forget about the missing payment just because Misato helped him dry some fruit.

“...C’mon, man, stop with the long face. Wanna come up?” Ryouji suggested, patting the space next to him on the bough. He continued to grin shamelessly, as if Misato’s pain was funny to him.

Misato had several misgivings. Would the tree limb break with two people on it? If they were both up there, who would catch the fruit? But in the end, he silently pressed both hands against the trunk. Ryouji benevolently showed him the best branches to grab onto for the ascent and made sure his feet were positioned in the right places. Although the trunk was about six and a half feet in height, Misato managed to hook his feet into a couple holes in its surface and haul himself between two large branches, seating himself where they forked.

“Wow. You actually got up here with more grace than I expected,” Ryouji said, smirking.

Misato smiled. “Thanks to your kind guidance.”

From the top of the slender tree, they could see both the roof of the main house and the rural landscape stretching out behind it. At some point the sun had begun to set, backlighting the higher branches with blinding rays. Round fruits and crimson-dyed leaves acted as a picture frame to a serene, tranquil world, outlining rice fields surrounded by small clusters of red clay roof tiles.

“The sun’s so bright, you can’t even see the persimmons

properly anymore,” Misato commented, squinting. Ryouji had handed him the pruner, but he couldn’t really see what he was doing. He did his best to block out the light and pry more fruit from the tree, yet despite multiple attempts came nowhere close. It wasn’t long before he gave up completely.

“I’ve got sunglasses though,” Ryouji said, grinning as he took the pruner back from Misato. Somehow, although his sunglasses were barely tinted, he effortlessly located and snipped another branchlet. Then carefully, to avoid bruising the fruit within, he extended the pruner to the ground and gently plopped its contents onto a patch of grass. His lips stretched into a proud smile.

Misato’s eyes narrowed. “...Are you planning on peeling these tonight?”

“Naturally.”

“Do you realize how many there are...?”

“Well, if we don’t have a buttload of ’em, they won’t look all pretty when we hang ’em up.”

They had enough to festoon the eaves of the entire house. Their home would be the epitome of autumnal countryside living.

“The amount of sugar you can eat is honestly kind of impressive.” Misato shook his head in disbelief.

Dried persimmons were incredibly saccharine and had very little flavor otherwise. Misato couldn’t abide most sweets, but it was worse if they lacked any accompanying qualities. Foods like dried persimmons or red bean paste had no salty aftertaste, sourness, or oiliness to them. They tasted like pure sugar, which Misato detested. He appreciated the aesthetic tradition of Japanese confections though, so it was a shame he couldn’t bear to eat them anymore.

“Nah, you’re just a big idiot. Sweet stuff’s always good,” Ryouji stated definitively. “Actually, no—it’s the other way ’round. Anythin’ that tastes good is always sweet. The human body’s designed to recognize the stuff it needs as sweet, so when it comes to food, sweet and good mean the same thing!”

He certainly was passionate about his tastes.

“Uhh...” Misato began, shooting him an extremely dubious look.

Ryouji immediately interrupted him. “Whatever you’re about to say, I ain’t listenin’,” he snapped. “If you haven’t seen the light, that just means you haven’t trained enough. How ’bout you go into

the mountains and try spendin' ten days without a proper meal? I promise ya, anythin' you find to eat or drink'll taste sweet as hell. Man, even grass tastes sweet," he said solemnly.

Misato remained quiet; he couldn't refute that. Ryouji wasn't really talking about training his taste buds but about the ascetic practices of Shugendo monks. Misato couldn't imagine how that must've felt. He'd never experienced such severe starvation.

"Besides, if you pair 'em with somethin' salty, dried persimmons go great with sake. I'll show you how it's done, so get to work already," Ryouji said, breezily jumping down from the tree. They'd picked just about every persimmon his pruner could reach.

Naturally, Misato couldn't copy Ryouji's acrobatics. Clinging tightly to the trunk, he tentatively found his way back onto solid ground again. He hadn't been wholly seduced by the promise of alcohol but decided to shut up and follow Ryouji's lead all the same.

Such arrangements had become increasingly routine of late. Misato first noted the pattern on the day he was roped into peeling chestnuts. He'd been subsequently rewarded with some delicious chestnut rice.

"So, we've had chestnuts, persimmons... What's next? Matsutake mushrooms?"

Mushroom hunting was probably child's play for Ryouji.

"Oh, true. They should be in season any time now," Ryouji said, nodding. "I guess I'll try the mountains the next time it rains. Even if I can't find any mushrooms, there'll be other stuff."

Matsutake mushrooms were most commonly found growing in the shade of red pine trees. While many pine trees had already been eaten away by various insects and birds, a few pine forests persisted in the mountains nearby. Every once in a while, there was a matsutake trade-in market on Misato's way to work.

"Can I come with you?" he asked.

"Sure. Be careful you don't pick us anythin' poisonous though."

The plastic bags rustled as he and Ryouji hauled them through the front door. It was looking like Misato would be able to successfully mooch dinner off Ryouji.

"They'll probably all look the same to me. You'll have to check through them afterward," he admitted, laughing.

"Knowing you, we'll have bags full of dodgy mushrooms,"

cackled Ryouji.

Misato trod on his heel *hard*, then made a quick escape. He heard a mildly vexed groan of complaint from behind as he ran out the back door toward his room.

Ryouji's Past: The Ghost Manor

TECHNICALLY, Ryouji Karino was a business owner. He ran a company with one employee: himself. His profession, however, was rare in comparison to more run-of-the-mill self-employment. He wasn't a private detective or antiques dealer, nor an assassin.

He was a psychic.

"Om kili kili vajra hum phat!" He thrust his hands in front of him, effecting a mudra, and created a barrier, separating the room from the outside world. The outdated Japanese-style apartment was fitted with a relatively large closet with stained paper sliding doors and a black wooden frame. One of the doors was half open, allowing something slimy to ooze out from within.

It was a thick, viscous liquid, almost like tar. As it spilled out onto the yellowed, splintered tatami mats, a terrible reek invaded Ryouji's nostrils.

It was the smell of decaying animal remains. It didn't have the briny stink of an aquatic animal but that of some sort of land mammal. The visceral sense of disgust gnawing at Ryouji's gut was no superficial reaction; his survival instincts were kicking in at full throttle, alarm bells ringing in his head.

"Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen...!" he chanted, performing a mudra in tandem with each of the nine syllables: he slashed the air four times vertically and five times horizontally. The pungent tar scattered and vanished, and the area inside the barrier was clean once again, although an intense atmosphere of evil remained. It was coming from the source of the tar—the depths of the closet.

With his right hand at the ready, Ryouji stood in front of the doors, his muddy shoes leaving prints on the floor. He took off his faintly tinted sunglasses and quietly hooked his left hand into the door's divots. His high-cut basketball shoes scraped against the tatami mat as he moved.

He flung the sliding door open. On the top shelf of the closet, a dark shadow pressed against the wall. It was somehow far darker

than the rest of the surrounding gloom. Upon Ryouji's rude intrusion, a caliginous, slithery tendril reached toward him. Luckily, Ryouji was prepared, and he briskly cut it away with his mudra.

His silvery green eyes glinted. They were extremely difficult to hide, especially for a Japanese man. He smiled a lopsided grin.

"*Namah samanta-buddhanam indraya svaha!*" He produced a single-pronged vajra from his hoodie pocket and launched it into the center of the shadow like a dart. The blade gave off a flash of light, and the shadow finally fully disappeared.

At the back of the closet lay a cloth-wrapped pole about three feet in length. Ryouji grabbed it without a moment's hesitation. The muted noise of metal against metal rattled from within the fabric. It was a sheathed Japanese sword. As he tightened his grip around it, a piercing scream resounded in his ears. The cry was so acute that there was no way to tell if it was a man or a woman. A shimmer of hot air began to rise from the sword, assuming a human silhouette before rushing at Ryouji.

"Hyah!" Ryouji gripped both ends of the sword before sharply swinging his knee up.

SHWK.

A dull snap sounded from inside the cloth. The blade had snapped completely in two. A distant high-pitched tone echoed through the air like a death knell.

"There. All done," he said in satisfaction, pushing his sunglasses back on and dropping the bundle containing the broken sword to the floor. He combed his hands through his bleached hair, his silver ear piercings shaking with the motion. He retrieved his vajra from the back of the closet and stuffed it back into his hoodie pocket.

Ryouji didn't own the sword. He didn't know its history or value. In fact, he wasn't interested in how the tainted object ended up there in the first place.

Because he wasn't a detective. Nor an antiques dealer, nor an assassin.

He was a psychic—nothing more and nothing less.

ON a narrow street just in front of the station was a small building

about three stories tall. Ryouji pushed open the glass door to a real estate agency's office on its first floor.

"Ah-ha, Ryou! Great work today," a balding man called out from behind the desk at the back of the room, giving him an amicable wave.

"Sure." Ryouji nodded, returning the friendly gesture. He casually pulled a chair up to the counter, and the man walked over, still singing Ryouji's praises.

"You always work so fast, my boy," he said, smiling.

"I try," Ryouji said with a grin. "I left the source object there. Some kinda Japanese sword. Full of hatred. I had to break it though, so it probably ain't worth much anymore." He shrugged, arrogantly propping his elbow on the back of the chair and spreading his legs wide.

Low-tint sunglasses sat on his nose, and his blond hair stank of wax. He was in his early twenties and wearing a huge, branded hoodie with low-hanging cargo pants to match. Anyone who didn't know him would think he was some kind of yakuza underling.

"Ah-ha, so it was really there? I heard it's quite an impressive katana. *Expensive*, too." The old man raised an eyebrow.

"When something's *that* haunted, the value doesn't mean anythin' anymore, man. By the way, you might wanna do somethin' 'bout that apartment. The sword wasn't the only nasty thing in there. You could do with changin' the tatami mats and the paper doors. You'll need to get a cleanin' service in there, too, as well as a Shinto priest."

No one had been able to tolerate the place for very long. Ghostly happenings had been driving tenants out ever since a death occurred in the apartment a few years prior. It'd been Ryouji's job to fix that. And, as it turned out, an old katana in the back of a closet had caused all the unrest.

The apartment was the embodiment of cheap. So much so, it was a wonder the constructors had bothered to build two separate rooms for the toilet and the bath. Given the incredibly low rent and poor state of the building, Ryouji could hazard a guess as to how such an extravagant sword had ended up in such a place. But so long as he had enough information to exorcise the evil dwelling there, he had no interest in the particulars.

"Sounds about right. But Ryou, there aren't any Shinto shrines in that area, y'know? I don't think there's anyone we can ask..."

The man hummed. “Can’t you do it? We’ll pay all the additional fees!”

“Oh, uh... Sorry, but that’s not really my thing. You can ask a priest from one of the other shrines in Tomoe,” he suggested quickly, standing to pull his wallet out of the back pocket of his cargo pants. The wallet chain attached to his belt loops jangled. He produced a carelessly folded sheet of paper, then handed it to the man. “So that’s my bit done. Could ya sign here, please?”

Although he made a shoddy job of it, Ryouji was surprisingly on top of his paperwork. He wrote out job quotations, contracts, invoices, and receipts.

Despite his valiant attempt to solicit extra service, the man gave a sigh of defeat after one look at Ryouji’s face. He reluctantly took the invoice. “...Guess I’ll have to. Could I put you on a different job then?” he asked as he signed and stamped it with the company’s seal.

“Whoa, for real? You’re really workin’ me hard today,” said Ryouji, frowning. The man passed back the invoice. Ryouji checked it over, then returned the customer copy to the man—the company president.

“Thanks to you, a lot of these kinds of properties come to us nowadays. Keep up the good work.” The man grinned, patting Ryouji chummily on the arm.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryouji sighed, wrinkling his nose as he stuffed the crumpled invoice back into his wallet and sat down again. The real estate agency was a lucrative client.

Although he knew he couldn’t light it yet, Ryouji took out a cigarette and began to fiddle with it between his fingers. Over the past few months, the employees in the agency office had come to know him and his idiosyncrasies and barely looked at him twice anymore.

Tomoe was in the heart of Hiroshima prefecture. The serene countryside town had a population of almost sixty thousand people and was the self-proclaimed capital of northern Hiroshima. In the six months Ryouji had spent there, the real estate company’s president had taken a liking to him due to his status as a “genuine” psychic. Evidently those were few in number.

“Y’know where the winery and the art gallery are? If you keep going in that direction, there’s a large plot of land the council is planning to make into a tourist haven. They’re inviting all the big

hotel groups to build there. But there's some land there that the companies just can't buy up, no matter what they do. No one's lived there for forty or fifty years, and the house is basically rubble, but for some reason..."

Apparently, after the last inhabitants died, the inheritance process wasn't carried out properly, leaving the property unpurchasable. That was nothing unusual. Families often forgot to communicate transfers of ownership to the real estate register, particularly in rural areas. Patrimonial disputes over dirt-cheap land in the middle of nowhere were rare, after all. Such bureaucratic concerns had nothing to do with Ryouji, however, which meant there had to be some other issue getting in the developers' way.

"If an heir dies, claim to the land falls to their partner or kid or whoever. But...in this case, the claimant always disappears," the man explained in a hushed tone.

"They 'disappear'?" Ryouji raised an eyebrow in confusion as he sank back into the chair, toying with his cigarette.

"That's right; they just vanish. When one heir disappears, the next person in line starts acting strange. Then, within a few years, they disappear, too. It's a vicious cycle of missing persons cases."

"Whoa... That's gotta be a pretty brainy ghost. It knows the entire family tree, huh?" Ryouji said with a crooked smile.

"Indeed. Well, to be honest, I don't know much 'bout it. The current claimant's living in Kyushu though, and we tried calling her, but she insisted she couldn't sell the property because anyone who got involved with it would die. Sounded like some kinda curse, so I told the buyers about you. Also, when some of their people went to take a look at the land they *did* manage to purchase, they allegedly saw something weird once night fell..." the president said, spreading a map and some forms out on the counter.

"The inheritor wants to meet you, too. You can reach her at this number. Thanks a bunch." He smiled, handing over a business card. A woman's name was printed on the front in bold ink.

Ryouji let loose an exasperated sigh. "Stop decidin' on jobs for me before I've even agreed to 'em," he grumbled.

"What's the problem? You don't have any other work to be getting on with, right?" laughed the president heartily.

Ryouji gazed up at the ceiling, his brow furrowed.

RYOUJI was a psychic—*not* a detective, nor an antiques dealer, and *definitely not a licensed architect*.

He had no interest in the sad backstories of strangers' homes and felt no emotional attachment to objects or buildings with long histories. In his line of work, however, he was frequently forced to interact with such things.

"Thanks for comin' to meet me. I'm sorry it's not somewhere a little fancier, but I don't really know any stylish cafés 'round these parts, y'know?" he said with a casual wave of his hand, slumped in a booth at a family diner.

"No problem... It's nice to meet you," the woman said with a polite bow of her head. She was the current claimant to the cursed plot of land. She appeared to be in her thirties, and her hair was tied up in a ponytail and adorned with a jeweled clip. She was wearing a deep blue top paired with a long, beige cardigan. She didn't have the look of someone being harassed by a curse whatsoever.

"I'll pay your bullet train ticket back to Fukuoka, aight? Make sure to eat somethin' good while you're here, then head home. This won't take long," Ryouji promised, offering her the seat facing him.

They weren't in Tomoe but at Hiroshima Station. Tomoe was a little awkward to get to from Fukuoka, so Ryouji had decided to meet her in Hiroshima City to save her an even longer journey.

"Oh, you don't need to pay for anything. I was the one who wanted to meet, after all," she said assuredly, although her expression was slightly stiff with nerves. At first, Ryouji had planned to make the trip to Fukuoka, but she'd offered to come to Hiroshima instead.

"All right, then." Ryouji shrugged. "Anyway, want a soda?" he suggested, pressing the service buzzer at the table. "So. Gimme the lowdown. Don't worry if you're not sure about some details, and... Oh, right. I'm Ryouji Karino, by the way. I guess you could say I'm a psychic. Medium. Exorcist. Whatever you wanna call it. Either way, I'm the one the real estate agency hired to help deal with the land your family once owned in Tomoe," he explained, remembering his manners as he handed over his business card. Since he had no official job title, it simply listed his name and contact details. After introductions and a little small talk, they got to the heart of the matter.

"I *can't* sell the land," the woman—Rika Imada—whispered.

“And why’s that?”

“The house’s owner still lives there,” she murmured.

“By ‘owner,’ do ya mean...the woman who last lived in the house?” he guessed. A razed manor comprised the centerpiece of the property. Before it fell victim to demolition, a woman married into the proprietor’s family and was the last house’s resident before passing away herself.

Ryouji went through the information he’d heard from the real estate agency, Imada nodding in agreement. As might have been expected from a long-standing company in the area, its president was well versed in the lengthy, complicated history of that particular plot of land.

Apparently, the woman’s husband had died rather young. She and her parents-in-law were not on good terms, however. Although she did her best to endure their insulting remarks, once they passed away, she was driven out of the house by her sister-in-law and other extended relatives. And because her child never found a job or married, the line of legitimate heirs ceased to exist.

Imada had inherited the property as a distant relative of the people that cast the woman out. After the woman’s death, misfortune and death hung over the family like a dark cloud, as if she were haunting their bloodline. Since then, every single inheritor had disappeared in one way or another, whether in an accident or natural disaster, or simply vanishing. And though she’d never even seen the place nor had anything to do with the original drama, the property rights fell to Imada.

“The same dream comes to every inheritor: they find themselves all alone in front of an old, abandoned house in the middle of the night...” Imada said, recounting the story with her head angled slightly down.

It sounded like the source of the problem lay within the manor itself. Perhaps the spirit of the woman was using the dreams to lure each successor to the house.

Now for the crucial question.

“And...have you had that same dream yet?”

Imada slowly nodded, fear creeping into her eyes. “I have. In the dream, I suddenly knew the area really well. Then when I woke up and looked at a map online, I was able to find that same location in real life.”

“Nah, nah, wait a sec. You’re not tellin’ me you actually wanna

go there, are ya?” he interrupted in a panic.

Her eyes were suspiciously vacant, as if she weren't seeing the room around them but somewhere else entirely. It was possible she'd made her way to Hiroshima under the influence of the manor's pull. Ryouji worried that if he let her leave in such a state, she would end up a missing persons case by the following day.

Imada jumped, shaking herself as though she'd just roused from a waking dream.

“I'm sure you've already looked at the place on a map or with street view thanks to the internet, but just so we're clear, that house ain't there anymore. I went there myself last week. It ain't nothin' but a grassy wasteland,” he said plainly.

He'd visited the property in preparation for meeting Imada. It was in a secluded, dreary location but otherwise in no worse a state of neglect than any other forsaken country lot in a rural, underpopulated area like Tomoe. He hadn't sensed anything untoward, although perhaps that was because he'd gone during the day.

Imada, however, looked a little dissatisfied with his warning.

“I'm the one in charge of this case, aight? I really need you to listen to me. You should head home before the sun sets today. I'll even walk you to the platform and watch the train depart. Okay?” he asserted. “I'll give you some talismans to protect your dreams from interference, as well as some spirit-binding string. We'll talk while we walk. Let's get goin'.”

Fukuoka was a long way away. If he wanted to get her away from Hiroshima before night fell, they had no time to spare.

Admittedly, making talismans and charms was not Ryouji's forte. And they would function merely as stopgap measures, so he had to find an actual solution fast. He ushered Imada out of the restaurant and began to plan out what he would need for the protective charms.

RYOJI resided in a house about a twenty-minute drive from central Tomoe. Originally it belonged to the village chief, and it was too large for Ryouji to make full use of by himself. He kept most of the rooms shut, utilizing only the bare necessities.

Before he moved in, the house had been empty for around ten years. It was fitted with contemporary plumbing, the sunken fireplace had been removed, and tatami covered the living room ceiling. The kitchen initially had a dirt floor, but part of it had been resurfaced with wooden flooring to engender a more modern experience. Ryouji was effectively living out of those two rooms, although there were numerous guest rooms and storerooms throughout the main building in addition to an outbuilding, storehouse, and shed. A stucco wall enclosed the lot on all sides.

The large living room had once been home to the sunken fireplace, but its current main features were a low dining table and a futon. Ryouji was sprawled out across the latter, a cigarette between his lips as he stared at his laptop. He'd already turned the lights off and thus had to rummage through piles of manga and empty plastic bottles to track down his ashtray.

If he were to cause a fire by smoking in bed, the building would burn to a cinder immediately; it was old, and wooden to boot. Additionally, the mountain-like stacks of weekly manga magazines were the perfect tinder. But he'd lived in the house for half a year and had yet to set it aflame, so he'd stopped being quite so conscious of that danger.

Eh, I'll be fine.

Outside the mansion was a Japanese rock garden, and a section of the grounds had been landscaped into artificial hills. The other buildings bordered a courtyard filled with a variety of garden trees. The estate was nestled at the foot of a mountain, and two ponds fed by alpine streams were located in the courtyard and rear garden respectively.

In all honesty, the huge estate was too much for Ryouji to manage. And as the temperature increased, so did the weeds. No lone person could keep on top of them. He'd completely given up on the courtyard and the rear garden, and they were in a terrible state. The place was the quintessential haunted mansion.

His gaze flitted down to the time display in the corner of the laptop screen. It was long past midnight. He was a night owl, so he wasn't sleepy yet, but he was tired of scrolling. He closed the lid with a sigh. He stubbed his cigarette in the already-full ashtray and took a large swig from the lukewarm bottle of cola to the side of his futon.

BANG. BANG-BANG. BANG.

Something was pounding against the wooden door leading to the rear garden. Turning a deaf ear to it, he buried himself under the duvet.

SKRRRRRT. SKRRRRRT.

The pounding switched to scratching. Ryouji squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ignore the clamor, but eventually couldn't stand it any longer.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" he boomed, throwing himself into a sitting position.

He leapt to his feet, not bothering to change out of his sweats as he grabbed the long khakkhara staff propped up in the corner of the room. He violently flung open the frosted glass door and stomped down the walkway facing the garden. The dim, naked lightbulbs swung back and forth. Something was clawing at the old storm shutter that shielded the back door.

His khakkhara in one hand, he undid the screw-type lock with the other.

A khakkhara was a monk's staff that was ornamented with several metal rings hooked through a hoop affixed to the top of the shaft. All of the specialized weapons he used were Buddhist ritual implements. In spite of his rough appearance, Ryouji was a genuine Shugendo ascetic—even if he wasn't a very good one.

Just as the inner glass door squeaked open, the late-night visitor went quiet.

I really am sick of this noise.

Ryouji yanked the door toward himself and brandished the khakkhara over his head. The golden rings jingled, and the pointed head of the staff glinted. He curled his fingers over the storm shutter handle and pursed his lips together. Then he threw it open with all his might.

"Boo!"

A gigantic face occupied the entire door frame, its tongue lolling out impishly. Its protruding eyes rolled restlessly in opposite directions, and thick fur covered its skin. Enormous, fearsome tusks projected from either side of its mouth.

But after years in the industry, Ryouji was far past the stage of being frightened by mischievous spirits. "Do you realize how freakin' loud you are? And stop lookin' at me like that!" growled Ryouji, stabbing the tip of his khakkhara into one of its bulging eyeballs.

“Raaaaaargh!”

“Hey, can it! What the hell do ya expect if you keep showin’ up here?!” Ryouji yelled irritably in return, sending a flying kick at its huge snout.

The face rushed backward into the darkness, and an amused cackle echoed through the air. Ryouji gritted his teeth. The spirit was among the specters who liked to journey down the mountain to the estate to “play.” Ryouji didn’t see how getting poked in the eye with a holy staff was really that fun, though.

It was an everyday occurrence. The estate was somewhat of a hub for specters due to its location. Moreover, the lack of maintenance during its period of vacancy had given rise to a plethora of shadowy, hidden spaces, which made it a perfect home for spirits.

Ryouji *had* taken measures to ward off the evil ones. However, his approach to exorcism was to swing his khakkhara at whatever foe stood in front of him; he didn’t have the ability to forge any intricate, long-lasting barriers.

“*Namah samanta vajranam ham!*”

He blasted a wave of purifying flames out over the bedraggled garden before slamming the door shut. He ran a hand through his relatively flat hair, which was still damp from his bath. His shoulders drooping, he trudged back to his room.

Night owl or not, he was thoroughly fed up with his visitors’ nightly antics. He heaved a deep sigh.

Guess I’ll put another talisman up tomorrow. They never work for long though.

RYOJI’S sedan crept up a narrow mountain road that wound between unploughed fields. The road was barely the width of a car. Overgrown weeds crowded the track on both sides, and the car’s wheels mowed them down as it trundled along, spraying green-stained water across its metallic gray paint. Dusk was fast approaching. Moisture filled the air as night began to fall, scented with flowers and greenery.

At the end of the weed-swathed asphalt drive was an empty plot of land overrun with long-unpruned garden trees and unkempt

brambles. There was no indication that anyone ever came by to cut them back; a sense of unbridled desolation pervaded the area. Nature was reclaiming the land, reverting the lot to nothing more than mountain foliage. Thin branches of self-sown saplings poked intermittently through tall grass that stretched far past the height of Ryouji's head.

He parked the car at the end of the road and climbed out of the driver's seat. He lit the cigarette between his lips. He leaned against the car door, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. As he breathed it out in a long puff of air, trails of vapor danced across the golden horizon peeking out from the brow of the mountains.

"Aight," he said with a grin, his cigarette propped between his teeth. "Let's see if anythin' shows up this time." In the fading light his sunglasses appeared darker than usual, cast in shadow.

When he'd visited the property during the daytime, nothing about the "manor" was out of the ordinary. Hence, he'd decided to try his luck at night, although he preferred to deal with such matters during daylight hours whenever possible. He put himself at a disadvantage by facing a spirit when its powers were at their strongest.

He pushed away from the car door and opened it, then crushed his cigarette into the ashtray inside. He'd smoked it right down to the filter. He retrieved his implements from the back seat and made sure to lock the car (just in case). Despite the total lack of people in the vicinity, a dim, lonely streetlight flickered on in front of him. At the foot of the road he'd spotted an old, weathered sign that read "School Road - Beware of Pedestrians." It was one of the very few remnants of proof that a village had once been there at all.

Ryouji clipped a fanny pack boasting multiple pockets around his waist and picked up his khakkhara. "Hopefully, I'll have this whole thing settled in a flash."

Animal trails meandered from the tangled vegetation and into the mountains beyond. Deer, wild boar, tanuki, foxes, and many other woodland animals were known to live in the region. Frogs' mating calls began to echo from forgotten waterways and the surrounding wild fields.

When the sun dropped behind the mountains, night descended in the blink of an eye. The dully lit scenery was suddenly lost to darkness, a never-ending abyss extending before him.

The old-fashioned streetlight flickered gloomily. A moth

fluttered toward the glow, dancing frenziedly in front of Ryouji's face. He automatically shooed it away. Abruptly, the small moth plummeted to the ground at his feet, and in a swift motion he retracted his hand, alert.

"Uh-oh," he said, turning his gaze back to the void in front of him. "It's here." His mouth stretched into a lopsided grin.

Through the tall grass, the outline of an old farmhouse with a thatched roof layered by iron sheets emerged from the ether. There it was—the ghost manor.

Let's do this.

He strode toward the manor but soon slowed his pace, a frown etched into his features.

"Damn it, I knew it'd be dark as heck out here," he muttered, heading back to the car and sticking his head inside the cabin. "This goes against *all* my principles of fashion, but...hopefully no one'll see me."

He took out a safety helmet with a lamp attached to the front. It was identical to the type of headgear spelunkers wore. He grumbled to himself as he switched the light on. It physically pained Ryouji to have to crush all the spikes of hair he'd spent so long perfecting. In conjunction with his casual, American-style clothes, the safety helmet reduced his entire look to "construction worker." It bothered him, but the fact that there was no one—no *humans*, anyway—around to witness the outfit slightly lessened the wound to his dignity.

Pulling himself together, he forced his feet toward the phantom manor looming over him.

HE could see a large room with a dirt floor through the front door. At the back of the room an etched glass sliding door marked the entrance to the living room. Twinkling in the light of Ryouji's headlamp, the cherry blossom pattern on the glass was refracted onto the floor and walls.

The house no longer existed in the realm of the living. It had been demolished ten years prior and had stood vacant for over forty years before that. And yet, its ghost lingered on.

The front door was twisted out of place and wouldn't budge an inch. Ryouji ripped it from its frame and tossed it into the garden

before proceeding inside, stepping onto the dirt floor.

In an instant, all noise from the outside world ceased.

It was so silent that the ringing in his ears was suddenly unbearably loud. But then the faintest of sounds from within the house made its way to Ryouji. With his khakkhara firmly braced on his shoulder, he quietly crept forward. The sound was coming from the other side of the etched glass door.

Y'ain't gonna lure me anywhere, I promise.

He glared at the door. Dusty floorboards complained under his weight as he padded up to the entryway. Putting his fingers to the door handle, he took a deep breath. Then he threw the door open, and it clattered loudly in response.

His headlamp shone in the darkness, illuminating a cloud of dust dancing in the air. The room was floored with wood, and there was a sunken hearth on one side. Ryouji's gaze followed a line of pot hooks suspended from a large beam. There was a faint creaking sound, and he looked further along to see some straw rope wrapped around the timber. The wood squeaked and groaned as the rope swayed back and forth. Something pale floated underneath, oscillating in tandem.

It was a woman's face.

Long, mussed hair plastered her cheeks, and she was staring at Ryouji with wide, unblinking white eyes. A strange liquid dribbled from the corners of her gaping mouth. She wore a woolen kimono, and her floppy limbs dangled loosely off the floor, swinging to and fro. Her clouded eyes rolled further back into her head, and two bottomless, unearthly spheres transfixed Ryouji.

"Aghh... Mrrrgh..." Her pallid lips opened and closed stiffly, a bizarre groan issuing from her crushed throat.

As though to urge him closer to the woman, a fleeting cacophony of scratching noises slowly pressed him from behind. He tore his gaze away from the white void of her eyes and tensed up his core.

"Om kili kili vajra vajri bhura bandha bandha hum phat!" he cried and thumped his khakkhara on the floor. Its rings jingled clearly as the pointed tip of the staff wedged between the floorboards. As the metallic sound rang out, the uncomfortable noise from behind Ryouji went silent. However, he could tell that whatever had caused it wasn't truly gone; he still had the peculiar feeling that he was surrounded by a swarm of invisible insects.

“*Namah samanta vajranam ham!*” he chanted, positioning his fingers in the Root Mudra of Acala. Instantaneous, white flames licked at the floor, radially branching out from Ryouji. As if fearful of the spreading blaze, the small creatures behind him cowered, their presence growing increasingly distant until they seemed to vanish altogether.

And yet, even as the white fire licked at her feet, the hanged woman merely stared at Ryouji. Once the flames devoured her socks, they traveled up the hem of her kimono. Her limp arms and legs remained unmoving. Her mouth had stilled, too, although black liquid continued to spill from it in thick droplets. Eventually, the flames engulfed her black hair. And still she made no attempt to resist; she simply let them envelop her entirely.

THUD.

At last, the rope burned through, and the woman fell to the floor with a heavy, wet-sounding impact.

Ryouji stood as still as a statue, frozen in front of his anchored khakkhara with his hands fixed in the same mudra. The stench of burnt hair and flesh assaulted his nostrils. He was on high alert—he sincerely doubted that would be the end.

Sure enough, something black slithered amid the flames.

A mighty rumble roared around him as the entire house began to shake: the doors, the floor, the walls...everything. Huge bangs and crashes resounded from all directions, almost as if a giant were slapping and kicking the house from outside.

“...That’s gotta mean she wasn’t at the core of it, huh? Tch,” he said, sucking his teeth. Finally, he released his mudra and whipped his sunglasses off.

The world before him warped and twisted. The floor and walls disappeared. In their place, a pitch-black abyss unfolded around him.

Ryouji’s mystical green and silver tengu eyes could see through the illusions ghosts conjured and detect hidden spirits. He’d been born with them, but in all honesty, he found them nothing but a general nuisance in his daily life. His beloved sunglasses were imbued with a charm that dulled his eyes’ power, allowing him to see the world as other living people did.

He could discern that the dark space cocooning him was not actually empty. Concentrating very carefully, he could perceive that the air brimmed with numerous tiny entities. A deep frown pulled

at his lips as he fished a cigarette out of his pocket and popped it between his lips. He flicked his lighter open with a *clink*, and sparks flew as he drew it up toward his mouth. The tip of his cigarette glowed vermillion.

The murky black floor, walls, and ceiling appeared to squirm under the flare of Ryouji's headlamp. Millions of long, tenebrous hairs glinted as they reflected the light back at him, and they wriggled slightly as they grew longer and longer, giving form to the room around him. Apparently, the house itself was the source of the curse. The grudge of the woman who once lived there was most likely the sole material of the building.

"Wish I didn't have to look at this crap," he groused, wrinkling his nose. In a word, it was *gross*. Curses weren't pretty to look at. Unfortunately, using his eyes was the fastest way to locate where one originated.

He turned his attention to the spiritual presences in the room, trying to ignore the disgust crawling up his spine. The spirit that had once taken the form of a woman's dangling corpse was a large, black mass of hair.

Ryouji took up his khakkhara once more and recited a *dharani* intended to ward off calamity and disaster. "*Tadyatha kate vikate nikate pratyarthike pratyamitre!*"

He ran into the next room, trampling the crawling black hair as he went. He hurried toward where he sensed the most spiritual activity but didn't go unnoticed. Several strands of hair darted out to stop him.

"Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!" He cut them away using the Kuji-in Mudra. Surprisingly, dark red blood splattered from the "wound."

"Are you freakin' kiddin' me? Hair doesn't bleed!" he snapped. His objections only seemed to spur it on, though: locks of hair swooped down one after another, and he had to use both his khakkhara and mudras to hack through them.

While fiercely battling the attacking tresses, he caught sight of a wildly undulating clump of hair that was far denser than the rest. More and more hair poured out of it as the seconds passed, almost like blood from a beating heart.

"Gotcha," he said grinning, his cigarette moving with his smile. There was no doubt—that was the curse's core. "Good and evil alike, the heavens and Buddha regard as one. The three

obstacles and the four demons shall eventually bring enlightenment, with the demon world and the pure land built on the same principle. Buddha-nature is indiscriminate and exists within all!”

He drew his khakkhara over his right shoulder like a javelin. Aiming at the middle of the heart, he lobbed it into the air with all his might. It pierced deep into the mass, sinking as if in quicksand. Almost immediately the hair stopped gushing forth and instead began to convulse, the spirit writhing in its final moments.

At last, it lay utterly still. Ryouji warily approached the core, then hoisted his khakkhara out of the mass and hurled the remains of his cigarette onto the floor.

“Time to burn.”

The river of hair ignited easily, black smoke seeping into the air as the strands disintegrated into ash. Ryouji noticed a broken circular mirror lying in the middle of the blaze. Perhaps it had once been fastened to a dresser. It was about the size of a human head and framed with cracked and faded lacquer.

“This was the source, huh?” he murmured, crushing the glass beneath his foot. It readily crumbled into dust, as if made of sand. At the very same moment, the world around him seemed to brighten a little. A gentle wind blew past him, carrying the scent of greenery. The night was calm, as though nothing had happened at all.

The house was gone, leaving Ryouji in the middle of an empty lot.

“...That ain’t gonna be the end of it, is it?” he sighed. “I’ve sure got my work cut out for me.” He redeposited his sunglasses on his nose and waded back through the sea of weeds toward his car.

A few days passed.

Ryouji returned to the abandoned ruins once again—in daylight. He’d spent his morning at the real estate agency that oversaw the case, so it was probably around noon by the time he pulled up to the site. After his previous encounter, he’d thoroughly researched the woman who once owned the ghost manor. The president of the agency had provided as much information as he could.

“The cause of death was suicide by hanging. Her kid died young, and it sounds like she lived alone for several years after that. It’s not clear why she killed herself, but for one thing, she wasn’t too easy to get along with and didn’t have any friends in the neighborhood. Apparently, the house itself had a sort of sinister atmosphere, and no one was all too keen on that.”

Ryouji expected as much. It was possible her intention had been to curse the place in her very last moments, and she hung herself as part of the ritual.

He pushed through the luscious green grass, relying solely on his memory to navigate to the correct location. A shovel rested on his shoulder instead of his usual khakkhara.

A couple features of the ancient estate were spiritually significant. With the manor demolished, only one remained—a well.

All psychics knew that wells were gateways to the realm of the dead. They were dark, deep, cold pits that connected spirits with the world of the living. Water gods also dwelled within their depths. When tearing down a house, it was important to completely fill in any wells.

It was also good practice to stick a hollow bamboo stem down the side of the well such that the stem extended about six inches above ground. The bamboo acted as an air vent once the hole was filled in, enabling any dark energy present to disperse rather than build up under the earth. Most regarded the method as mere superstition and not an essential precaution, but not all superstitions were unfounded. If they were, Ryouji would likely be out of a job.

At the core of the ghost manor was a mirror. If that mirror was what was drawing the inheritors to the house, there had to be a physical version of it somewhere on the property.

When the general public referred to evil spirits or specters, they spoke as if the departed’s soul physically tarried in the world and went around causing mischief. But that wasn’t strictly true. The “departed” were precisely that—gone. They no longer had a material form to contain them, and disembodied consciousnesses couldn’t function on their own. If something of them was left behind, they had to have possessed something tangible. On Ryouji’s last job, for example, the object in question had been a katana. It was the same concept with the mirror. Both were the sorts of vessels that easily absorbed human thought and were therefore

commonly inhabited or cursed.

The curse-bearing mirror was somewhere on the estate, and Ryouji figured that the bottom of the well was the most probable place.

“Uhh, I ain’t seein’ any evidence of a well. They must’ve plugged it up real good.”

He squinted, peering around aimlessly. What with his safety helmet from the other day and the shovel he was currently carrying, he definitely didn’t look the part of a medium. If he were to lose his memories at that very moment, he would have to go through the rest of life thinking he’d been a construction worker. The scope of his work had certainly increased since coming to Tomoe.

He maneuvered toward the most likely spot for a well to have been built (as per the agency president’s advice) and scrutinized his surroundings with analytical eyes. Amid the layers of dense weeds and roots he couldn’t even see the soil, never mind inspect it for traces of subterranean structures. He didn’t see any bamboo jutting out from the undergrowth either. The sheer vitality of the plants had resulted in quite the handy camouflage. From the curse’s point of view, being buried deep underground had worked to its advantage.

The mid-June sun beat down at full force, cultivating a sheen of sweat on Ryouji’s skin. There was no way he was going to expose his arms or legs while in the sharp embrace of millions of tall blades of grass though, so he would simply have to suffer in long sleeves and gloves. He felt extremely overheated.

The clear, early summer sky shone blue, and cuckoos and pheasants emitted carefree chirps as they went about their daily business. Not a single indication of human activity was audible amid the sounds of wildlife. All that was left were neglected fields, weed-choked roads, and the wreckage of houses reclaimed by nature. Although the land was obviously thriving, it was no longer part of the human world.

“...I didn’t really wanna do this, but...it is only a doll, so...” he grumbled, thrusting his shovel into the soil and plucking a scrap of paper from the pocket of his mountain jacket.

It was a small paper doll with Rika Imada’s name and age written on it in black ink. It was bait of sorts; he’d prepared it after his last visit in order to draw the spirit out. He’d mailed the paper to Imada and asked her to jot down her details, then blow on it

three times. Such a doll was usually used to exorcise the labeled person, serving as a substitute for them.

He folded the doll vertically in half and stood it on his palm. As he prayed for it to work, a cold wind grazed his cheeks. The paper fluttered into the air, dancing toward the ground. Ryouji's eyes followed it intently until it eventually slipped into a large, dense knot of roots. Blinking, he removed his sunglasses.

No matter what happened to the paper doll, no harm would come to Imada. Even so, Ryouji couldn't help but feel a little nervous.

A skeletal hand emerged from the roots, rustling as it clawed toward its prey. It promptly snatched up the doll, and the crumpled paper dissolved in flames in its fist. Ryouji had designed the charm to combust in the unlikely event that anything *did* happen to Imada.

"Om kara kara visvak svaha!" He put his thumbs and forefingers together in the Dharmachakra Mudra and chanted the Binding Sutra of Acala. A mystical rope curled around the skeletal hand, halting its movement. Ryouji nimbly seized the shovel and tried to scythe the vegetation obscuring the hand—with no success.

"Where the hell is it?!" he barked.

Suddenly, at the base of the roots he'd cut away, the upper arm of the skeleton sprouted from the loam. Ryouji's mudra had lost shape, releasing the hand from its constraints. Free to move, the whole arm surfaced, reaching for Ryouji, attempting to drag him down. Then the entire skeleton forced its way through the crust, lifting the thatch of roots and bulbs along with it. The sound of earth crumbling resounded through the air, and the skeleton stood tall in the light of day.

"Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen! Begone, demon!" He performed four vertical and five horizontal slashes before punctuating his demon expulsion incantation with a diagonal swipe.

WHAM.

The skeleton went flying backward, its bones scattering in the air. Ryouji was fairly certain it wasn't the source, so his reprieve would be temporary at best. The hole created by the skeleton's escape was already filling back up at Ryouji's feet, countless weeds whispering as they grew of their own accord and layered themselves across the earth.

"Ugh, for real?" Ryouji grimaced.

As if to avenge the skeleton he'd just destroyed, several others

began to burst out of the ground, their hands groping toward Ryouji. Some had large, thick frames that had most likely belonged to men, and some were far smaller—probably children. Ryouji counted six skeletons in total as they converged upon him in a small army, all swarming around him and trying to grasp him with their dirt-ridden hands. The putrid smell of damp earth assailed his senses.

The skeletons probably belonged to the inheritors that had been lured to the house in the past. Of the seven victims that Ryouji had researched, not one's remains had ever been found.

A childlike skeleton clung to Ryouji's legs. He delivered a swift, hard kick to its skull, and it cannonballed far into the distance. He pivoted toward a larger skeleton—possibly a woman's—and drove his shovel into it. He didn't have time to exorcise every single one. That could be done after he tackled the source. A hand reached for Ryouji's ankle. He crushed it underfoot before it could ensnare him.

A sense of misplaced resentment emanated from the bones, begging Ryouji to join them. The spirit didn't begrudge him for hurting them but for not having to suffer the same pain they felt.

"Join me."

"Why am I the only one who has to suffer?"

"Why do you get to live freely while I'm unhappy?"

"How do you deserve freedom, when all I have is this prison?"

Thought after thought cascaded from the desperate piles of bones.

"Beats me," Ryouji huffed, sucking his teeth as he fought his way to the old well where the skeletons had first arisen. The earth was disturbed and messy where they had dug through the soil, finally revealing the stone wall of the original structure.

"Om kili kili vajra hum phat!" He formed a barrier around himself, separating the skeleton army from the well.

"...Guess I've got no choice but to dig it up myself," he sighed. If the core of the curse was at the bottom, he was going to have to do a fair amount of intensive labor.

Praying it was the type of well that was only a few feet deep, he plunged the tip of his shovel into the dirt.

RYOUI had to wonder: who was the curse's original target?

He normally didn't care to poke his nose into other people's affairs. How it happened, who was in the wrong, what happened to them afterward—it was none of his business. His job was to undo the curse, not hold a memorial service for the woman who cast it.

However, after working in his profession for so many years, he'd come to understand something: when humans found themselves shackled by something they thought undeserved, they tended to cling to the very environment that tormented them.

"I should be compensated somehow for all the pain I've endured." It seemed to be a kind of defense mechanism that developed when someone was trapped in a traumatic situation. People started to believe that some kind of light awaited them at the end of the tunnel if only they could power through the pain.

Rural society was insular and rife with stiff, antiquated values. The woman had probably wearied of being forced into circumstances she wasn't comfortable with and had looked forward to living freely on her own property. Once her parents-in-law died, and if she could just drive out her sister-in-law somehow...then her child would grow up, get married, and look after her in her old age. No one would abuse her or push her around. At last—she thought—she would be able to live out the rest of her days in leisure, her child and their partner at her beck and call.

However, in the end, that future never came to pass.

Her child died young without ever marrying. It wasn't the result of something as grand as fate or bad karma; it was pure happenstance. Some fraudsters in Ryouji's line of work claimed that the death of a family line was preordained, but in actuality—unless the consequence of a serious curse like the woman's eventual grudge—it was simply the outcome of an accumulation of unlucky coincidences.

Most likely, the woman couldn't stand how unfair reality was.

At long last, after digging deep into the earth, the tip of Ryouji's shovel hit something hard.

In the same moment, a tsunami of resentment deluged his thoughts.

WHY? *Why did things have to end this way after I endured so much? What did I ever do to deserve this?*

The woman removed the mirror from the dresser that had once been her dowry chest. She flipped it over and began to etch the letters of a curse into the back. She painted the grooves of each letter she carved with her own blood.

I'm not letting anyone else have it. This house is mine. I waited so long to inherit it, but now...

If anyone tries to take it from me, I swear I'll haunt them.

She threw the mirror down the well, then immediately started to fill in the hole, hiding the evidence.

I'll make sure no one is ever happy living here. If I couldn't find happiness here, no one else deserves to either. How can people just ignore the fact that I endured so much only to be left with nothing?

No one was ever to be happy there. For all eternity.

That was her curse.

THERE was a Japanese saying about curses: "One who curses another shall dig two graves." In that sense, Ryouji doubted that the woman had really gained anything by casting one.

No—by the time anyone decides to curse someone, they're already deep in hell with no way out.

Life wasn't fair. Karma was merely fantasy. Some people just happened to encounter unreasonable hardship in life; there was no logic to it. Effort and perseverance alone didn't bring about good fortune. When devastated by the injustices of the world and overwhelmed by their feelings of dissatisfaction, many ended up on a road to self-destruction. They destroyed themselves and wished that same baseless suffering on others. Thus curses were born.

Ryouji chucked his shovel aside, squatting at the bottom of the well. He scraped away the remaining soil with gloved hands and picked up the round mirror. A huge crack marred its surface.

Just how many times had the woman looked at herself in that mirror and lamented her discontent? How much ill will had it taken to abandon her body and bequeath such a curse?

With his tengu eyes, Ryouji could see the woman's face staring back at him in the clouded glass of the mirror. Her aggrieved

expression appeared fainter and fainter in the reflection; the broken shards were already beginning to lose their power.

Ryouji didn't know any incantations that could save her. All he could do was watch over her as she vanished. "Time for you to go now. I won't prattle on about restin' in peace or anythin', but at least you won't exist anymore. You can't suffer if you don't exist."

In Buddhist tradition, there was no heaven or hell beyond the Sanzu River. In death, all souls returned to the same afterlife without fail.

The pain, sadness, and hatred left behind no longer belonged to anyone. They would dissipate, phantoms of memory.

Softly, Ryouji wrapped the cracked mirror in cloth.

RYOUJI Karino was a business owner, and he was his sole employee. He worked as a psychic. There was no dress code, and his working hours were totally up to him—although those perks were offset by the fact that he received no labor insurance benefits or welfare pension. National health insurance was his only protection.

The people he met via his job often chattered about how nice it would be to have the freedom he had or "How lucky!" he was. Usually, they were just making small talk, but other times, their tone of voice was genuinely disparaging. He always retaliated with "Well, you're the one payin' me."

Their eyes would flicker with contempt, envy, and a hint of hatred.

For some reason, people often begrudged those who weren't bound by the same responsibilities that they were. Perhaps they felt as if they were being ridiculed for futilely putting up with discomfort.

He threw himself onto his futon and reached for his laptop to check his bank balance. Earlier that day, the president of the real estate agency had contacted Ryouji to say he'd transferred the payment directly into the account.

"There it is. Nice." As promised, the full amount was there. He'd invoiced them after carefully adding up the number of days he'd spent on the case and the expenses incurred, so there was no

need to worry about any payment disputes.

All right, let's try to get some shut-eye.

As though it had been listening for the moment that he turned off his laptop, something pounded on the back door.

"For cryin' out loud... I'm not entertainin' your crap today, aight?"

The specters liked to antagonize him because they were pretty successful at it. The best course of action was to ignore them completely. He switched the lights off with a sense of determination, then snuggled down into his futon.

"Heeey! Heeeey!"

That night, it was opting for the old mimicry trick. A human voice sounded through the house. Ryouji couldn't think of anything more irritating. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself to ignore the world around him as a cackle echoed in his ears: *"Heeeey, little tengu! The human world must be lonely. Come out and play with meee!"*

Ryouji leapt up, the soles of his feet slapping against the tatami. Forsaking his tangled sheets, he snatched his khakkhara from the corner of the room. He stomped over to the door and slung it open with a *bang*. The noise rang cleanly through the nighttime quiet.

"I'm gonna absolutely *wreck* you tonight, dumbass! COME ON!" As he bellowed in exasperation, a thought occurred to him.

Maybe I should just get a job with a night shift.

That would keep him out of the house during the evening, meaning he could avoid the nightly specter invasion. And he'd be able to build a better network among the general public. The reason he was so perturbed by the specter's taunts was because he'd been feeling a little deprived of human contact lately. It had been ages since he last had a proper conversation with someone.

The specters seemed to have no intention of revealing themselves, stoking Ryouji's rage even further.

"That's a shame. I thought you said you wanted to play with me," he quipped with a wicked grin, his silvery green eyes twinkling. His khakkhara at the ready, he took a deep, level breath.

His soundless explosion of power awoke the crows. They cawed in unison as they flapped away in confusion, soaring across the mountain-framed horizon.

Misato's Past: A Normal Life

AS a college freshman, Misato Miyazawa had one humble ambition: to live like a regular student.

It may have been a rather pitiful goal, but it was a huge deal to Misato. He wanted to spend time studying, working part-time, and participating in club activities. If he could find a girlfriend, that would serve nicely, too. Normality was completely unfamiliar to him, and his desire to experience it formed the foundation for his aspirations—as did the fact that he had no memories of ever engaging in a proper, pleasant conversation with a girl.

And for that reason...

“Y’know, you’re kinda cute, Miyazawa. Like a little animal or something.”

Her cheery smile alone made him nervous. Misato cursed his lack of experience as he ducked his head and fiddled with his too-long bangs.

I really need to cut my hair.

His thoughts scrambled to focus on literally anything other than the girl in front of him, as if to escape the situation altogether. Her hat blew in the gusty seaside breeze, her carefree smile unwavering.

“R-Really...?” Misato tried his utmost to meet her gaze and match her easy smile. His voice came out so quiet that it was probably whipped away by the rumbling of the sea the moment it left his throat.

The raging surf of the Pacific Ocean crashed against the cliffs under a clear, sunny sky, and blasts of wind fluttered the sleeves of Misato’s cheap-looking cotton shirt. The distant horizon shone with the light of the sun, dividing the heavens from the earth where the deep, abyssal sea spawned the white-crested waves rushing ashore.

“Well, I guess I’d better get going,” she said with a casual gesture, obviously not dwelling on his strange behavior. He watched as her small frame disappeared down the grassy bluff, every blade and stalk rippling in the wind.

There was no use overthinking it. By the time Misato had met her, she already had her eye on another guy. Worse, Misato was his exact opposite.

...Forget it. I don't exactly have a way with women. I should just give up on the girlfriend thing.

Suddenly, in the distance, a dark shadow floated across her pale, shimmering polo shirt. Yet, in the cloudless summer sky, there was nothing to cast a shadow.

Silently, Misato turned his head and closed his eyes.

“**MEET** back here in front of this monument at three o'clock sharp. Anyone who's late will get left behind! Right, off we go,” Iketani bellowed.

Iketani was the president of the Historic Landmark Society. They were on a field trip to a scenic site famous for its usage as a setting in classic Japanese poems. The seven society members split into two small groups: the three women and the four men.

In all honesty, there weren't very many things to see at the site, merely a small history museum nearby and a cave system under the cliffs. The girls entered the former, and the guys took off for the latter. Meanwhile, Misato headed toward the history museum alone; he was fond of those sorts of exhibits, and after what he'd witnessed earlier, he didn't want to get too close to the cliffs.

There's a Shinto shrine to Ebisu down in the caves. Maybe I should stop them...or maybe nothing will happen at all, and I'll look stupid. Plus, Iketani's there, so it'll probably be okay. People are already starting to suspect me, and I don't want to stand out any more than I already do.

Deliberating, Misato came to a standstill.

Aiba, the vice president, turned to look back at him, then leaned over to Iketani and said something.

Iketani threw Misato an extremely disappointed look. “He's just a scaredy-cat.” Misato couldn't actually hear him, but judging from the movement of his mouth, Iketani had replied with something to that effect.

Seemingly appeased, Aiba turned to face Misato and began to

walk toward him.

Their eyes met.

Flustered, Misato hurried toward the museum. He fled into the building and breathed a deep sigh of relief. With Iketani he could at least pass off his concerns as being “scared,” but Aiba wasn’t quite so easy to handle.

He walked over to a display and stared at it vacantly in an attempt to purge the whole interaction from his mind.

“Hey, Keiko. What did you and Miyazawa talk about?”

The sound of his own name interrupted his train of thought. He could hear the girls talking just up ahead around the corner of the exhibit.

“Huh? Nothing, really,” Keiko Hisaka—the girl that had called him cute—replied in bewilderment.

“Did he ask you out?!” squealed the other two girls in amusement. Misato froze on the spot.

“No, cut it out! He just warned me that he could sense danger in the area.”

“What? Again...?” one of them sighed. “The guys headed to the cliffs, y’know. Do you think they’re okay?”

“But anyway, Miyazawa’s *gotta* have a crush on you, Keiko! He’s always looking at you.”

“He can’t really look at me when we talk, though. He’s super self-conscious.”

Misato could barely stand to listen to them. He buried his face in his hands. The embarrassment was too much to handle.

“So, Keiko. Would you go for him?”

Give me a break! Please, just stop!

“Umm... Well, I dunno... I think he’s...”

Misato could’ve predicted her hesitance. No one was ever happy to be told they were undesirable, of course, but it was to be expected. He hung his head in shame.

Then his phone began to ring urgently from his pocket.

IKETANI was nowhere to be found.

Misato nibbled at his lip in worry, mulling over what Aiba had relayed to him. The sound of his phone had exposed the fact that he

was eavesdropping, but there were more important matters at hand. Misato sprinted out of the exhibit, although not before noticing Hisaka's face turn ghostly pale out of the corner of his eye. Her expression wasn't that of someone who was simply worried about a club member.

The reason he'd had a "premonition" of danger was because he could sense spirits. He'd studied religious incantations and rituals since childhood and had lived a life entirely unlike any of his peers'. He'd recently lost a large proportion of his power, however, after involuntarily consuming a curse. In the wake of those events, he seized his chance to pursue a more "normal" existence, although his ability to perceive spiritual beings remained unaffected.

A mere three months had passed since he started pretending not to see them.

I never thought Iketani would fall victim. If only I hadn't been so stupidly fixated on keeping up appearances... If I'd ended up looking like an idiot, I could've just quit the club anyway.

The kinds of places the Historic Landmark Society visited were strangely rife with specters. Every time Misato detected something amiss, he would warn the others (without mentioning his spiritual powers). They'd managed to avoid any catastrophes, but Iketani had given him a nickname as a result of his caution: Scaredy-Cat. Aiba and Hisaka, on the other hand, had begun to realize that Misato was...special.

He ran down the pathway that led under the cliffs, on the alert for Iketani's presence. En route he found a side road cordoned off with a "No Entry" sign, which he swiftly stepped over. He clambered up the uneven path, the high winds battering at him. The guardrail alongside him appeared old and unreliable; if he fell, he would find himself diving headfirst down the precipice and into the sea. No one in their right mind would dally so close to the cliff face, even if they were lost.

As he made his way around a large, protruding outcrop, he saw a man walking very unsteadily up ahead.

"Iketani!" Misato yelled.

Two black masses were wrapped around each of Iketani's legs. They could've been hands, hair, or seaweed—whatever the material was, it certainly wasn't of the living world.

An extremely pungent whiff of brine assaulted Misato's nostrils, making it very hard to regain control of his breathing.

“O sacred flame, holy water, divine wind—kyuu kyu nyo ritsu ryuu!” Forming a mudra with his index and middle fingers, he chopped the black tentacles away. Just as they flinched away from Misato’s attack, Iketani lost his footing.

“*Iketani!*”

Misato dashed toward him. In a miraculous stroke of luck, Iketani woke from his trance and clutched at a clump of weeds just as he was about to slip down the escarpment. But the mysterious tentacles hadn’t given up yet.

And Misato didn’t have the power to exorcise them anymore.

“Miyazawa?! What am I—?” Iketani yelped in a state of severe confusion.

Misato grabbed his wrists, frantically trying to pull him back onto the path. “Get up!” shouted Misato, tugging with all his might as he bent over the edge—but it didn’t look like Iketani was in any position to drag himself back up.

“Crap, my legs...!” he complained, a look of sheer desperation on his face.

The tentacles had his legs completely paralyzed, and Misato couldn’t do anything to drive them away while gripping Iketani’s wrists. He racked his brain for a way to get rid of them, then stumbled upon a thought: maybe he could use Iketani himself. He imagined Iketani wouldn’t be too pleased about it though.

But what else can I do?

He took a deep breath, resolving himself.

“There are black tentacles wrapped around your legs! It’s an evil spirit trying to drag you into the sea!”

Iketani’s jaw tightened, and his grasp tightened on Misato’s hands. “Don’t be stupid! *Ghosts don’t exist!*” he bellowed in anger. The tentacles suddenly dispersed, as though his words had physically hurt them.

He reclaimed command of his limbs, hauling himself up the cliff face in one fluid motion. Iketani shook off Misato’s hands in disgust, causing him to promptly fall on his backside.

Iketani despised anything supernatural and possessed no spiritual ability whatsoever. As such, he was protected by a sort of natural barrier that repelled most spectral harm. That was why he was so quick to disregard Misato’s “premonitions” as mere paranoia, even when the others had grown suspicious.

“We’re leaving!” Iketani huffed, stomping away as though

nothing had happened to him. Still sitting on the hard ground, Misato watched him go. As always, the guy was in total denial—which happened to have worked to Misato’s advantage.

“He’s full of spirit, that’s for sure,” Misato laughed dryly as he heaved himself to his feet.

WHILE retracing his steps back to the main path, Misato encountered a small silhouette in his way.

“Oh, Hisaka,” he said in surprise.

Hisaka returned Misato’s uncomfortable smile. “I’m sorry... I think I called it here. The sea really is terrifying,” she said softly, gazing at her shoes.

“So you knew?” he replied without thinking. He clapped a hand over his mouth, but Hisaka simply gave him a strained smile from beneath her hat.

She seemed to have the opposite effect on spirits—instead of repelling them like Iketani, she drew them in. Historic sites were often hubs of supernatural activity, but near the sea was particularly treacherous. With the Ebisu Shrine in the vicinity in addition to the multitude of various, potentially liminal objects drifting ashore, the area was awash with spiritual energy. Consequently, and unfortunately, the population of malicious entities was also far higher.

“Yeah. I can’t see spirits, but...you can, can’t you, Miyazawa?”

There was no point denying it. He nodded candidly.

“I knew it,” she whispered. She wrung her hands in trepidation before hanging her head yet lower, forcing out her next sentence. “I...I *used* you. I used Iketani, too. When he invited me to the club, I noticed that he repelled those forces. I thought if I stayed with him, I could go to places I’d usually avoid. I thought his power would cancel mine out, and then nothing would torment me anymore. Then you showed up, and...” The wind stole her words as she slowly looked up at the blue sky.

She’d thought she could do the things normal people did.

If she had lived in a different town in a different era, she would have been worshipped for her gift. In reality, however, all it did was limit her freedom terribly.

She squinted, glancing at the sea before continuing in a forced, cheerful tone. “Never mind...! I should’ve known it was a silly idea! I made you worry, and I even dragged Iketani into it in the end.”

Misato wasn’t impressed that she’d joined the society knowing she would endanger someone one day. But then again, what could she have said? And whom could she have told?

Who am I to criticize her?

If he hadn’t hidden the fact he had spiritual powers, perhaps she would have come to him for help.

“Do you know anyone who can help you deal with it?”

She shook her head weakly. With no one she could turn to, she must have been under a lot of stress. “It’s not like I’m an expert in genetics, but there’s no one else in my family like me,” she sighed. “And I researched protection charms online, but they didn’t work at all.”

It was next to impossible for regular citizens to search out genuine psychics. They would have to be incredibly lucky to chance across the proper techniques without industry connections. Misato couldn’t relate. From knowledge to execution, he knew it all. He’d been raised learning the art of controlling and utilizing his inborn spiritual power. And while he’d gotten sick of his family troubles and eventually run away, he’d never actually disliked his training.

What am I even trying to do?

Sudden doubt struck him. He’d been craving normality, but after finally obtaining it, he couldn’t do anything anymore. He couldn’t do anything for Hisaka.

“Don’t worry. All I have to do is not come to places like this. I won’t bother you anymore,” she said with a lonely smile, turning on her heel.

The grass is always greener on the other side.

Normalcy came with a cost to what he was good at. Misato had refused to acknowledge that fact until then. People often said to “take pride in what makes you you.” Although it was easy enough for someone to say, actually doing that was another matter entirely. Not to mention, it was even harder to value an aspect of oneself that directly caused suffering—as in Hisaka’s case.

He sensed something stir beneath the cliffs once again. Whatever it was didn’t necessarily have evil intentions, but all the same, Hisaka didn’t benefit from being unwittingly surrounded by spirits.

Then, do I really...?

Did he really, truly desire normality?

If he honestly didn't want to be involved in the spiritual world anymore, why hadn't he ever left the club? The university wasn't small. He could've just joined another student organization with similar activities—one that wasn't haunted by Hisaka's spectral shadows.

Why am I acting like this is such a big deal?

After a few moments' hesitation, Misato stopped her. "Wait!" he insisted, and she looked back at him curiously. "Um, listen... I can't do anything about it right now, but..."

He had started to distance himself from his spiritual abilities because he resented their impact on his life. Quite frankly, he was scared to face them again. But he couldn't stand being powerless even if it meant he could attain normalcy. The thought of being totally useless forever despite his innate talents didn't sit right with him.

"I... I'll help you," he declared firmly, looking her right in the eye. "I'll find a way for you to vacation at the beach or in the mountains as much as you'd like." He clenched his fists. She stared at him with wide eyes. There was no going back.

"...Really?" she asked, her voice tinged with slight skepticism.

Misato gave a sharp nod, ignoring how awkward he felt. "You know I can see spirits, but...that's not all. To tell you the truth, I used to study exorcism, too."

"Yeah. But it seems like you don't want anything to do with that anymore." She smiled sadly. Apparently, she'd seen right through him—maybe because she'd been harboring a similar secret.

"That's true, but...I want to help you, Hisaka," he stated nervously. As a late bloomer, he wasn't at all used to such acts of chivalry.

A beat of silence passed.

Hisaka let a quiet giggle slip. "Actually, I take back what I said earlier. You're actually pretty cool, Miyazawa," she said, smiling.

Thanks, but I can tell you don't really mean it.

Misato deflated, returning her wry smile.

She turned to leave again, her back to him. "...Thank you. That would be nice," she said, embarrassment in her tone, before running back toward the monument at a half-jog. Misato watched her go, unable to look directly at her.

AFTER that, Misato quit the club. He had no time to waste on extracurricular activities or romance if he wanted to regain the power he'd lost and formulate a plan for Hisaka.

Every once in a while, he thought back on his brief three-month stint as a normal student. It had been fun—in its own way. And yet, some days, he'd felt as though something was missing.

After all he'd gone through, he'd returned to the world of psychics. A sigh escaped his lips, quickly followed by a soft chuckle.

To Misato Miyazawa, *that* was true normalcy.

Afterword

THANK you so much for purchasing this copy of *Onmyoji & Tengu Eyes: The Spirit Hunters of Tomoe*. I'm Yoshiko Utamine.

I originally published this novel online with the title “Daily Life in Tomoe” (巴市の日々) but decided to change it when I got the chance to publish the book professionally. When I revised the manuscript, I tried to accentuate the story's atmosphere while preserving the feeling of the web version. I hope those who have already read the web version enjoyed the finished product, too!

The real-life location I based Tomoe on is actually my hometown, Miyoshi, which is also in Hiroshima prefecture. If you're a fan of mystery or horror, you might already know that a ghost museum opened there last year. There are some rather famous ghost stories based in the area.

I didn't actually touch on any of those famous stories in this novel. I didn't mention any of my hometown's local specialties or landmarks either, for that matter (sorry!). However, I did include lots of my favorite scenery and other things that left an impression on me while living everyday life there. No matter if it seems like a completely different world than the one you live in, makes you miss your own hometown, or is similar to the town you currently live in, I'm just happy to share it with you all.

I couldn't have published this book without the help and support of so many people. Firstly, there's Yone Kazuki, who drew the absolutely beautiful cover illustration. Then there's Yoshinao Ooka, who did the cover design. And lastly, I'd like to thank Onaka, my editor, who was always patient with me, even when I didn't have the slightest clue what I was doing. I couldn't be more grateful to all of you for working with me in the midst of a devastating pandemic.

I'd also like to thank everyone who supported me online: Morimura, Himiya...and especially Hattori and I-sama, who were there for me and encouraged me while I was still publishing the web novel. When I got the news that this book would be officially

published, they celebrated with me, and I'm really thankful for that. I'm also extremely grateful to everyone else who read the novel and left me comments along the way. I couldn't have done it without you.

I'd also like to thank my mother, who randomly gifted a copy of the *Japanese Complete Collection of Incantations* (Hara-Shobo edition) to her young teenage daughter years ago (haha). It was a huge help to me while writing this book. Thank you so much.

Finally, I need to thank everyone who bought this book. If you enjoyed it even a little, nothing could make me happier. I'd just like to end this by saying I hope your experience with my book was a good one.

Yoshiko Utamine - July 2020



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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